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ABSTRACT

This book takes up the question of what shape high school English studies should take in the coming years. It describes an English program that blends philosophical depth with classroom practicality. Drawing examples from commonly taught texts such as "Macbeth," "To Kill a Mockingbird," and "Lord of the Flies," the book places literary analysis within a postmodern framework. It explores recent literary and educational theory--including reader response theory and cultural studies. The book devotes attention to the process of reading and its relationship to creative writing, which is put forward as an essential rather than a supplementary part of high school English programs. The end result is that the book provides insights on textuality, media studies, drama, and the 5-paragraph essay. The book also serves as a call for increased teacher involvement in curriculum reform. While the book's primary purpose is to examine what does and does not make sense in high school English teaching in view of current theory, it offers readers examples of effective classroom practice that takes English in the right direction. (NKA)

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Reshaping High School English

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With deep love and sincere appreciation,
this book is dedicated to my wife,
Jennifer Mansell

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1 "What rough beast . . . ?"

We need to reinvent English. No glib redefinition or timid reform effort will do.
Ben F. Nelms, "Reinventing English," *English Journal* editorial (1994)

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?
W. B. Yeats, "The Second Coming" (1921)

In June of 1978, I was at the end of my second year of teaching high school English. Our department head had called a meeting, leaving the agenda mysteriously blank. As we filed into the classroom, we were surprised to see desks drawn into a cosy circle. When the department head began to speak, it was in a carefully reassuring tone.

We knew something was up.

The head's studied gentleness could mean only one thing: something really bad was about to happen and we had better brace ourselves. He told us about meetings he had been attending, workshops to which only a few chosen leaders had been invited. This small group had been introduced to some new ideas, he said, and it looked as if these ideas were going to make a difference to the way we were expected to do our jobs.

The room became very quiet.

He proceeded to tell us that it soon might not be good enough just to assign pieces of writing for students to take home, work on, and hand in. He talked about "prewriting," about working with students during their drafting, and about something he called "personal" writing. He said we ought to begin thinking in terms of a writing "process."

For teachers who have entered the profession only in the last decade or so, it must be difficult to appreciate what a thunderbolt had dropped upon us. Within a very few years—five, ten at the most—"the writing process" had become the hottest educational ticket in town, and English departments everywhere claimed to be doing something about it. In those early years, as one might expect, implementation of this new model of writing instruction sometimes seemed a bit wooden. Our provincial Ministry of Education declared that, to encourage a "process orientation," student writing *had* to be kept in file folders; I remember the deepening sense of absurdity I felt at a meeting in which teachers earnestly debated whether to use single- or double-fold files, laminated or plain cardboard. At another meeting, charged with the task of pinning

down a "writing policy," a teacher leading the session asked, "How many drafts do we think we should require for each Grade Ten piece of writing? Three? Five? I think five sounds good." (I shuddered.) But all that was to come later. On that June afternoon in 1978, the next chapter of local educational history had not yet been written, and, to put it bluntly, we simply did not know what the head was talking about. As the newest teacher in the department, I hadn't heard anything about this in my teacher training. The older faculty had behind them years of habitual practice in standing at the front of the class, leading discussions of literature and assigning essays. For all of us, this new thinking didn't have any precedent in the discipline we had studied in university or in our own high school years.

Did we welcome with open arms this first hint of innovation? We did not. The department head's picture of the future was cloudy, as early visions usually are. It seemed we were being told that what we had all been doing—practices that *were* the subject English, as far as we were concerned—was somehow wrong. Our professional future was going to look different, but the details weren't yet available—only this nebulous shape that sounded unlike any "English" we had ever known. It was as if we had caught a glimpse of Yeats's "rough beast" slouching toward Bethlehem and weren't sure that we understood or wanted to see this new era waiting to be born. We left the meeting, as I recall, in somber and private moods. In the days that followed, one senior teacher muttered darkly about how many years she had remaining before retirement. Others reassured themselves that this wasn't really anything new, or that it was just another bandwagon: this, too, would pass. They were, of course, wrong.

The anxiety that I and others felt then must now seem quaint. Those new approaches grew into some of the most valuable educational developments in recent times. Writing teachers moved several steps closer to observing and working with the complex processes of learners, and were challenged to think in fresh ways about actually *teaching* writing, not just assigning and grading it. In retrospect, it was a great liberation, and the beast turned out to be a butterfly escaping from its cocoon. At the time, however, there was only the dread of facing an uncertain future.

Something like that dread may be taking shape again. We hear warning rumbles when an Australian educational leader speculates about the disappearance of English as a subject (Boomer 1988, 102) and British writers offhandedly comment that "the days of English as an academic discipline are clearly numbered" (Buckingham and Sefton-Green 1994, 213). We catch a scent of the beast in America when Ben Nelms (1994), as editor of the *English Journal*, declares that we need to "reinvent En-

glish"; Nelms reminds us of the creation of the subject a century ago and raises the "frightening possibility that such a bold initiative [today] might mean the death of English as we know it" (105).

We should be skeptical of apocalyptic prophecies. In *Voltaire's Bastards*, John Ralston Saul (1992) reminds us that one of the western world's longstanding obsessions is our "uncontrollable desire to give ourselves the impression that we have made yet another fresh start. We are constantly declaring new ages" (40). The baby-boom generation has a particular fondness for the rhetoric of "reinvention" and "revolution": we always seem just a slogan away from the next technological, cultural, or spiritual Age of Aquarius. Furthermore, major flips of the calendar have always sparked millennialist thinking, and as we approach the year 2000, it is no surprise to hear calls for renewal in many spheres mounting to a feverish chorus. For the sake of calm discussion, we do well to stay clear of revolutionary posturing. If you're like me, you're weary of entrenched battles between the "vanguard" and "rearguard" of our profession. Our understanding of life grows and changes, and it's best to sit down and talk about the implications of those changes without spreading alarms about standing on the brink of a cataclysm.

What are the conditions of birth for this new "beast" that threatens to disturb our complacency? A number of factors have come together to make it hard for us to be sure we understand what our subject is all about. Even when we think we do understand, we can't be sure our concepts are shared by the public, by administrators, or even by colleagues down the hall.

Many older models of English teaching have lost their persuasive power. The idea of passing on a cultural heritage has been shaken by attacks on the white, male, middle-class, Eurocentric narrowness of that tradition. The multicultural realities of English-speaking countries make it hard for us to hold up reverentially a model of culture that was designed in another age for purposes that no longer seem so commanding, including imperialistic and moralistic purposes. On the other hand, if many of us no longer have a taste for administering cultural medicine—or "ramming literature into kids' heads," as I heard one teacher boast—we are also uncomfortable with becoming mere technicians tuning students' linguistic skills. A pure-and-narrow skills approach too readily accommodates the more shortsighted demands of the business world. Our own education inclines us to insist that there is more to language than decoding and encoding, spelling and punctuation. There is a life of the imagination, and that makes a difference to human beings, even if it is a difference not easily measured by standardized tests.

The idea of English studies as a vehicle for students' "personal growth" has won favor in the last few decades, but, as we will see in the next chapter, the "growth" model's focus on individuals as isolated atoms and its silence about the role of contexts makes it lag behind current thinking about the more complex nature of "personhood."

With these foundations quaking beneath our feet, where are we left? In reality, I suppose we grab hold of whatever supports we can find and then carry on. That, however, leaves us with unsure footing, hardly in a position to march with conviction. At worst, we may find ourselves once again in Yeats's "The Second Coming":

> Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

Suspicion that that is an all-too-accurate description of the current state of English teaching—and unwillingness to accept that state—is the fuel that propels my thinking in the chapters that follow.

To help you understand what this book is about, I need to clarify what it is *not*. It is not a polemic for expanding the canon of school texts to include fairer representation of women and minorities. Others have made those arguments too eloquently for them to need repeating here, although in Chapter 3 I do press for a wider definition of appropriate program materials. You will notice that my examples of literature are almost always drawn from a tiny list of highly recognizable authors, with Shakespeare, Dickens, and Golding figuring prominently. You will also not find descriptions of the writing process or attacks on the teaching of grammar in isolation. My silence on those topics should not be misconstrued as indifference, but again, others have already cleared those paths, even if their leads have not always been followed as wisely as we might have wished.

Issues of evaluation, assessment, and computers in the classroom, so popular in the professional press and conference circuit, are largely (though not entirely) omitted on the grounds that those questions are logically a later step: we need first to reflect on our understanding of the central goals of our subject, and I have my hands full with that initial question.

Above all, this is not a book of "clever strategies for your Monday morning class." It does include many practical suggestions, but, at heart, the book is not a "bag of tricks." Rather it is an effort to think carefully about the direction of English teaching, to ask what this subject could and should be in the coming years.

Let us be frank about the problem this creates for you as reader and for me as writer. We high school teachers are known for our insistence on the immediately practical. Writers and editors for our professional journals have learned to be wary of speculation and philosophizing. Experienced workshop leaders know their presentations will be valued according to the number of usable tips they offer teachers. Our lives are busy, and facing several groups of twenty to thirty teenagers each day generates in us an urgent survival instinct that leaves little room for ethereal musings. It doesn't help that much theoretical work has been done by academics based in universities: most of us are deeply suspicious of "ivory tower" theorizing. Arthur Applebee's (1993) survey of high school English teachers in the United States found that over 70 percent of them report "little or no familiarity with contemporary literary theory" and most believe it wouldn't be relevant in any case (122). The very word "theory" probably has bad associations. Our own academic training often emphasized "practical criticism" or hands-on "textual analysis," while pushing literary theory to the margins. Similarly, the most obviously useful part of our professional training was often practice teaching or the first year of actual classroom experience—not any course in the "theory of education."

I am pulled in two directions. I have tried to respect my colleagues' understandable appetite for practical applications, and I do talk about lessons and assignments that have worked for me and that I have seen work for others. However, I also resist the urge to dwell primarily on strategies because that too often blinds us to the kind of overall vision that could make our work more meaningful. Some will say, "You can never get too many good lesson plans," but I think you can, when that stockpiling interferes with synthesizing and clarifying a larger vision. We probably already suffer from too many strategies—an "excess of practice" (Morgan 1990b, 200)—and not enough thinking about foundations and directions—the "*why*s of practice" (Mayher 1990, 176). After all, when our students read a novel, we count their reading a failure if they remain glued to isolated details of plot and character and cannot step back to consider larger questions of theme and purpose. Surely, by analogy, we should value our own acts of professional stepping back and envisioning, seeing something beyond tomorrow's lesson.

There's no reason why that act of envisioning shouldn't be informed by current and useful research and theory. Accordingly, the picture of English teaching that emerges in this book isn't "original" in the sense that I made it up myself. Instead, I try to synthesize the most interesting, convincing, and useful ideas that have emerged in the last few

years. In doing so, I attempt to be honest about acknowledging my sources, although it can be hard to track down the initial creators of ideas that have worked their way into general circulation. If you follow up my references, you'll find interesting reading; at the same time, I have kept the "scholarly apparatus" as unobtrusive as possible. The concepts that earn a place in this book do so not for the sake of trendy name dropping or jargon juggling, but because they make sense to me in my daily encounters with real high school students.

The concepts make sense because they begin to answer my need to understand how the work of the English classroom might shape itself into something more than a grab-bag of ideas harvested from here and there. For most of us, our teaching has been formed by a few influential teachers from our own schooling, a handful of respected colleagues, readings from books or journals, and the push and pull of classroom realities. From all this, we assemble a practice that keeps us going, but which has not always been scrutinized for its assumptions or challenged for inconsistencies. We may claim to scorn theory, but the moment we begin teaching we enact our understanding—our theories—of what language and communication are all about and what kinds of reading, writing, and talking deserve student effort. Theory is there, although it may be either explicit or submerged, sensible or chaotic. In the research cited above, Arthur Applebee notes that many teachers mix New Critical methods of textual analysis (presumably learned in university English courses) with reader-response methods (gleaned from professional readings and workshops). These are not entirely compatible approaches. At best, this mix might be an "eclectic compromise" (122), but at its worst, Applebee fears, it results in "tensions and inconsistencies . . . rather than a coherent and integrated approach" (201–02).

There is one more thing that this book is not: it is not the "last word" on English teaching. With all the areas I have not attempted to tackle, it should be clear that I don't see this work as a definitive manifesto. Rather, it is the opening of a conversation that I hope my colleagues will join. Effective conversational gambits need to be brief and need to leave conceptual space for others to enter. I have spun a few threads that particularly interest me and that pull together into the shape of something new and exciting. There are more threads and a larger shape yet to materialize. In the end, it doesn't matter whether you accept the specific pattern that I weave, but it does matter that we engage in this *kind* of questioning. We must come to terms with defining the heart of our subject. If we fail to define—and live—that "heart," we leave a conceptual vacuum, and there are plenty of legislators and interest groups only

too willing to define it for us. If we are unhappy with the version of English implied by the latest standardized test or this morning's editorial in a national newspaper, we are obliged to propose an alternative vision, and the best way to start is by making that vision absolutely clear to ourselves.

2 Beyond Barney and the Cult of the Individual

The preoccupation with the personal, and the relative neglect of the social and political is a chronic condition of postmodernity.

Andy Hargreaves, *Changing Teachers, Changing Times* (1994)

The act of meaning is a social act.

Michael A. K. Halliday, *Learning How to Mean* (1975)

"You are special, you're the only one / You're the only one like you," sings Barney the children's dinosaur (1994). "Everyone is special /Everyone in his or her own way." In those lyrics, we find one of the most abiding dogmas of our time—the celebration of the individual. It's easy to find more examples: comic book superheroes, Rambo, Clint Eastwood, and Frank Sinatra all do it "my way." Bookstores have sections for self-help, self-esteem, and self-promotion. Have you noticed that outrageous behavior is apparently excused by saying, "That's just who I am," or, "Well, he's sure an individual and you have to admire him for that"? In the schools, "individualized instruction," "student-centered learning," and "personal growth and expression" have become buzzwords seemingly beyond challenge. However, this preoccupation may have just about served its purpose. It may be time to take the next step in understanding ourselves, our classrooms, and our world.

Let's acknowledge that this romantic celebration of the individual has served Western civilization well. European Romanticism was a healthy reaction to the authoritarian narrowness of eighteenth-century thought and government, and the twentieth century, with its suburban homogenization and bouts of hysterical nationalism, has needed to be reminded of the value of the individual human subject. We are haunted by images of the *heil*ing masses at Hitler's rallies; opposed to those images we place Oskar Schindler—the individual who made a choice to act differently. Advertising has been quick to capitalize on this deeply felt appeal: against the reality of crowded subways and apartment buildings, the solitary Marlboro man stands as a resonant icon.

Consideration for individual students has undoubtedly propelled important educational advances. In English classrooms, we no longer see our students as receptacles of transmitted knowledge, but rather as young

people responding out of uniquely personal depths. Emphasis on the learner's subjectivity gathered strength noticeably during the 1960s, perhaps helped along by the "do your own thing" spirit of the decade: John Dixon's *Growth through English*, first published in 1967, was a landmark in that movement. In recent decades, this focus on individual subjectivity seems to have settled into doctrine. Robert Morgan (1990b), after examining Ontario Ministry of Education documents on the teaching of English in the 1970s and '80s, claims that the most frequently used word is "personal": English, apparently, is "chiefly in the business of 'personal growth,' developing 'personal values,' and helping students articulate their 'personal aims and goals'" (199).

Turning attention to the student as individual user of language was, I'm sure, a useful development in its time, breaking what must have sometimes been a sterile regime of exercises and recitation. We must not forget or lose this advance, but every idea has a life cycle; we now need to question the limits of the doctrine of individualism before our classroom practices harden into self-perpetuating rituals. I confess that I have become wary of the automatic assumption that "individualized" equals "better."

One danger of this assumption is the tendency to believe that everything important can be explained in terms of personal needs, understandings, and growth. If pressed, we would probably all concede that there are things beyond concern for the individual, but if we don't talk about and teach those "beyonds," our omission breeds what has been called a "culture of narcissism" (Lasch 1979). Andy Hargreaves (1994) speaks of a popular, naive faith in the "boundless self" that can supposedly accomplish anything if we just unleash its potential, aided by the latest self-help manual. It may be pleasant to believe that external constraints have evaporated, but no matter how assertive your personal power of positive thinking, there are things out there that will resist your best intentions. It would be shallow education indeed that failed to at least hint this much to students.

A more subtle consideration, however, is that the very nature of subjectivity may be more complicated than we sometimes recognize. Some versions of the individualist doctrine seem to suggest that you (the individual) are the starting point of meaning: you just have to figure out how you understand the world and how you want to express that understanding. The assumption is that you can do all that if you just introspect deeply enough.

But *are* you the starting point of meaning? Where did "you"—your "self," your desires, your intentions—come from? I know I'm always catch-

ing myself thinking "just like a man," "just like my mother," or sounding like a "typical teacher" or "typical Canadian." "How very middle class!" "What a baby boomer attitude!" Whatever personal identity any of us has develops within a matrix of circumstances outside our psyches: our place in history, parents, social class, sex, race, educational opportunities, and all the other accidents of personal history. In schools, we've all heard teenagers defend their tastes by saying, "That's just me; I guess I'm an individual," but the sheer predictability of widespread trends and fashions tells us that individual preference can't be the whole story. It isn't that we don't express personal choices and make our own meanings. We do; it's just that "personal" and "own" are tricky concepts, not the grounds of a final explanation. We are none of us romantic individuals, unfettered in the face of the universe. Rather, we are thickly entangled (or "situated") in complex contexts, etched by traces of the worlds around us. The fingerprint of individuality lies precisely in the map of those traces.

And, of course, all these contexts jostling for influence on the "self" aren't always compatible and don't necessarily find equilibrium. We are caught in a moving map, a shifting mosaic. This is most obvious in the adolescent who tries on different identities, but don't we all have times when the worlds to which we owe allegiance don't fit together comfortably? Listen to my concerned liberal self conflicting with my parental authoritarian self: "I don't care what I said about democratic decision-making; just finish your homework!" In other words, in contrast to the idea of a "unified, rational, self-determining consciousness," we might better understand subjectivity as "multiple, layered, and nonunitary" (Aronowitz and Giroux 1991, 76).

I'm suggesting that reverence for individualism, valuable as it has been in certain respects, may blind us by narrowing our focus to the individual and masking the context, by luring us into imagining that the "self" is some kind of pure essence, waiting to reveal itself. We teachers sometimes think of our jobs as romantic gardening: we just water the flowers of individuality, then stand back to watch them bloom, as if individual potential were packed into a little seed that will unfold according to its own natural logic. We might at least remind ourselves that the little plant has to contend with its world: bending with the wind, turning its face to the sun, making what it can of the bed of soil in which it finds itself.

In a rough and simple way, I suppose I'm saying that much of English teaching has paralleled the traditionally individualist focus of psychology, and that we should consider complementing that with some of the more cultural and societal interests of sociology. It was pioneer sociologist Emile Durkheim who, a century ago, coined the phrase, "cult of

the individual" (Lukes 1973, 23). In *Acts of Meaning*, Jerome Bruner (1990) speaks of the emergence of a "cultural"—rather than strictly individual—psychology, in which "Self is defined *both* by the individual *and* by the culture in which he or she participates" (116). If the foundation of meaning is not solely individual consciousness but also what happens between individuals and the rest of their world, and if we, as English teachers, are in the business of helping students understand those processes of meaning-making, then we need to ask ourselves a number of questions about our practices. I don't have all the answers to these questions, but, in later chapters, I try to think my way through a pedagogy that might help us see beyond the individual. This doesn't have to lead to a reactionary, anti-individual stance. We need hard thinking that resists extremism and keeps the doors of possibility open for our students.

What Are the Implications of Allowing Students "Personal," "Individual" Choice in Reading Materials and Writing Topics?

The student's personal choice is one of the most cherished items of faith in the educational cult of the individual. For some of us, Nancie Atwell's powerful book *In the Middle* (1987) has reinforced this faith. In my practice, I have worked hard to develop learners' "ownership" of their reading and writing. My Grade 9 students and I write back and forth about their personally chosen reading, and my senior writing class is a workshop with individually defined projects. Personal investment undeniably enhances motivation, but what do we see when we step back from this "blossoming flower" scenario?

Nancie Atwell actively shapes her dialogues with students with their growth in mind, and her book makes clear that she is not afraid to nudge, push, and pull students toward greater challenges. However, in some classrooms, reverence for personal choice has led to uncertainty about the status of teacher input and demands; for some instructors, "intervention" has become a bad word and teaching may be reduced to what has been called "a banal notion of facilitation" (Aronowitz and Giroux 1991, 117).

In a collection of papers called "Reconsidering Whole Language" (Church et al. 1994), Ann Vibert reminds us that the "whole language" movement, with its celebration of children's own choices, largely ignores the problem of "how children's choices and experiences are constrained by the available, how their responses and desires are constructed by the world in which they live" (12). Yes, we have to *start* with students' interests and knowledge, but the question of how to lead them further is vex-

ing. After all, my ideas about desirable avenues for growth are bound up with my own class, race, sex, and personal history, and I have to be cautious about imposing all that on my students. However, if I take a hands-off attitude, simply leaving choices up to students, they may well end up choosing *only* the texts and topics dictated by their own cultural circumstances. In that case, the advantage clearly lies with students coming from middle-class homes where there is already a literate culture that will guide them to the books and educational choices that bring success in school. In laissez-faire individualism, one is free to chart one's course, but the prize often goes to the person who had the best map and the swiftest boat before the race ever began.

I still want to capitalize on the range of interests and backgrounds that students bring to the classroom, and I don't want to see English curriculum taken over by prescribed reading lists for someone's idea of "cultural literacy" or pre-set writing topics that will be "good for them." However, we may need to be quite a bit more explicit about the complicated negotiation between what's "inside" the student and what's "out there" as available choices. We need to help students understand *how* and *why* they are making the choices they do, what other choices are available, and what consequences may ensue from their choices. In other words, part of the focus has to be on students working through the complexity of their individual position(s) in the web of society and culture.

Teachers may believe they are being apolitical when they resist the temptation to intervene in student choices, but there is nothing apolitical about silence if it means that certain individuals don't hear what they need to hear about what it takes to be successful.

What Do We Mean by "Authentic Personal Response"?

The move to reader-response forms of instruction in literature is a cornerstone of the approaches discussed in Chapter 4. I hope that proves I'm not hostile to response-based methods. I am, however, suspicious of the suggestion that just expressing your personal response is a satisfactory educational attainment, or that such a response could be evaluated for its authenticity. As should be clear by now, this use of the term "personal" is loaded and probably misleading.

For starters, what goes on in the reader's head is partly a function of who he or she is, which entails the reader's location in a web of social relationships. It might be more profitable to try understanding how that location has affected the reading, rather than imagining that the response expresses some ineffably individual vibration. Useful questions might include: "What do I bring to the text that causes me to respond as I do?"

"How am I influenced by language and society to respond as I do?" "How am I being positioned by the author and by my culture to read this text?" (Thomson 1993, 153).

In any case, it is not the student's inner, private experience that we see and hear in the classroom; it is instead a representation, a public act (Willinsky 1993, 18). This act is limited by the student's ability to handle specific communication tools. If we really believe that students' responses are the place to start, we had better make sure that, throughout the English program, many kinds of response are possible—individually, in groups, for teacher's eyes only, in small peer groups, orally, in writing, through drama, art, and whatever other forms might give students a chance to pull together ideas for circulation.

Whenever we "go public"—even if only to one other person—don't we always calculate our effect and play to the audience? The response journal written for a teacher becomes one event in what may be a subtle relationship. The teacher is probably an evaluator, but may also play many other roles: she may have given (or be interpreted as having given) signals that she wants to be treated as a confidante, or that she likes emotionality, or that she values scholarship; or she may have become a symbol of adult authority that the student tries to shock. And if the response is delivered before a group of classmates, the complexities multiply (Beach 1993, 108–09). Are these classmates friends? Is the student trying to impress someone? Whom? How? By being the cynic? The clown? The rebel? The expert? What kinds of responses might boys (or girls) not easily speak before their peers?

We should also think about the significant number of students who are uncomfortable with personal writing, preferring other written tasks. Dorothy and Douglas Barnes note this in their survey of practices in England (1984, 133), and I've heard the same from students in Canada. As one boy said, "I don't think my feelings are any of the school's business." For him, the assignment was an invasion of privacy, and why shouldn't he think so? An authority in charge telling him to reveal his inner feelings: this is the unmistakable voice of an Orwellian Big Brother, unless teachers take pains to clarify their intentions. As John Willinsky (1990) says, a perceived lack of purpose is a probable cause for this resistance (167): students need to see that the personal moment has a relevant place within a larger examination of issues or literature. This isn't likely to happen, however, if the responses are exalted as ends in themselves, or used as motivational tricks at the beginning of a unit, then dropped to get on with the "serious business" of literary analysis, as happens in many classrooms (Applebee 1993, 125).

None of this, I hope, suggests that we shouldn't work with student responses; Chapter 4 includes practical suggestions for doing just that. I am saying, however, that we need to understand there is nothing simple about saying to students, "Go ahead, express yourselves." Teachers need to be alert to these complications, and as students mature and reflect more carefully on their own patterns of communication, they too need to consider the ways in which public acts of supposedly personal expression may be transactions with heavily vested interests.

What Does Our Handling of Literature Imply about the Place of the Individual in Society?

I was taught in school that a small number of universal conflicts provide the foundation for all stories. You may recognize the list: "man versus society," "man versus nature," "man versus self," and "man versus man." With the rise of feminism, "the individual" replaced "man." For today's teachers, the list probably seems a little tired; we're not so sure that a neat package of abstract slogans takes readers very far in understanding the complexities of literature. Still, our teaching remains committed to the underlying assumption that literature is all about what happens to individuals. These topics should sound familiar: "How has character X grown and changed over the course of the novel?" "To what extent is X responsible for his own downfall?" "What evidence is there of X's . . . ?" "To what extent can X be described as 'heroic'?"

As Dorothy and Douglas Barnes (1984) have noted, teachers "brought up on the particular sensibilities of the English novel tradition" may find it difficult to see this individualist focus as a "cultural choice, a choice, that is, from amongst alternatives" (95). But it is a choice, a choice that has been made for us by decades of study guides, editor's introductions to school texts, and questions at the ends of chapters. This tradition reaches back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when English as a school subject was in its infancy.

To take one example from those years, A. C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy*, first published in 1904, with its relentless concentration on character, has set a pattern for succeeding generations of English teachers, whether they have actually read the book or not. Ian Hunter (1983) sees in the Victorian period the rise of "moral psychology" as a way of investigating human interiority separately from the church tradition, whose influence was by then declining. Emerging at the same time was a popular education that defined its role as shaping moral character in children, and saw literature as a handy tool for that end. (See also Morgan 1990a.)

Shakespearean plays, like Victorian novels, are indeed partly about the characteristics of individuals, but they are also about individuals *within social networks* and those networks and relationships have lives of their own that also ought to be available for examination. John Dixon, in *A Schooling in "English"* (1991) pinpoints this limitation in Bradley, who seems able to focus only on Macbeth *or* on Lady Macbeth, not on the charged interaction between the two. Dixon surmises that Bradley's preferred focus on the individual arises from Victorian, Evangelical assumptions about "character," and leads to a reading strategy that was passed on to the next generation of teachers (53).

In our own time, it has been noted that the rise of specialized workers necessitates team-work, but we understand very little about teams, thanks to our historical concentration on individuals (Drucker 1994). It is only within the last few years that teachers have begun to draw students' attention to the kinds of things that happen when they work together in small groups. We need to do a better job of theorizing social processes, both in life and in literature. "Theorize" can, I know, be a scary word, but I simply mean developing ways of talking about and understanding what goes on *between* people or characters, not just within them. We already take for granted a long-standing theory of individual character in literature. We "know," for example, that characters in books have traits, that these traits reveal themselves in the things a character says and does and in the way others treat the character, that apparent contradictions in traits or behavior can eventually be explained by discovering deeper underlying consistencies, and that characters will experience growth and turning points through encounters with fairly predictable types of ordeals.

There is little of the same kind of theorizing available for representations of social processes. When we bring William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* into the classroom, it is easy to talk about the main characters, but surely the story is at least as much about the crazy chemistry that materializes when people get together in particular contexts. We may make our chalkboard lists of Piggy, Jack, and Ralph's characteristics, but something is happening on that island that's larger than any individual. (In Chapter 5, I'll describe classroom activities that illuminate the areas between and around characters, not just the characters themselves.)

Incidentally, in these last few paragraphs, I've been slipping quietly between talking about characters in books and talking about people in real life, as if they were synonymous. They aren't, and that's one of the things, as we shall see, about which we have to come clean. Stories reflect, shape, or distort our understanding of individuals and societies in the "real world," and that, too, is fair game for discussion.

To move beyond Barney the dinosaur's assurance that we're special—"you're the only one like you"—means to begin recognizing ways in which we are part of social structures much larger than ourselves. It means recognizing the importance of contexts. As Sharon Crowley (1989) says, "No object of perception can be altogether known when it is studied in isolation from the system that gives it its meaning, from other objects that are both related to it and differ from it, both in space and time" (11). This means going beyond cheerful assertions of difference to thoughtful analysis of the sources and effects of difference, difference that becomes visible only when individuals make conscious their interactions with each other and with their cultures.

One result of all this is that things start to look a little more complicated. It was pleasantly simple to believe, "I'm me and you're you and that's all there is to say." It is more perplexing to realize, "I'm me and that's partly *because* you're you." More challenging still is a further horizon. According to the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990), growth of the self entails increasing complexity:

> Complexity is the result of two broad psychological processes: *differentiation* and *integration*. Differentiation implies a movement toward uniqueness, toward separating oneself from others. Integration refers to its opposite: a union with other people, with ideas and entities beyond the self. A complex self is one that succeeds in combining these opposite tendencies. (41)

Or: "I'm me and you're you, and my best moments of learning come from knowing that difference and also making you part of me and me part of you."

3 The Web of Textuality

To put it as directly, and perhaps as brutally, as possible, we must stop "teaching literature" and start "studying texts."

Robert Scholes, *Textual Power* (1985)

Once "text" is conceived of as a cultural artifact, any text past or present, classic or popular, fiction or non-fiction, written, oral or filmic, can be admitted to the English classroom for legitimate and rewarding scrutiny, from the standpoint of "Who made this? In what context? With what values? In whose interests? To what effect?" In this way, I see English teaching throwing off its long entrenched associations with a bookish capital "C" culture. The new English will take its place in the total curriculum as a vigorous, hard-headed, socially-critical, productive field of engagement with the here-and-now through its work with texts.

Garth Boomer, *Metaphors and Meanings* (1988)

Here are observations of two English classes.

The first class consists mainly of fifteen-year-olds. Although the course is labeled "advanced," there is a wide range of ability in the room. Students have been studying mass media for several weeks and on this day are discussing the "language" or "codes" of television drama.

They watch a short clip from a popular TV series. When the teacher stops the tape and invites comments, one boy says, "That guy who just arrived means trouble."

"Oh? Why do you say that?" asks the teacher.

"Look at the dark clothing and that slouchy hat. He looks like he's hiding something."

"And that mustache," adds another student.

"What? Mustaches mean bad people?" says the teacher, fingering his mustache.

"Well . . . on TV they do," laughs the student.

"He looks like a dope smuggler," interjects another, to general murmurs of assent.

"But I've seen that actor doing guest bits on lots of shows." The student names a couple of other series. "And he's always this stereotyped sleazeball. Have you ever seen him playing a good guy?"

There follows a discussion of the actor's physical appearance and its role in typecasting, until a student raises another issue: "And you saw how everyone stopped talking when he walked in. They just looked at him."

"So what does that say?" asks the teacher.

"It makes us look at him too."

"It tells you he's an outsider."

"An intruder."

"Anyway, that music tells you that he's no good. Remember? It was sort of suspenseful, spooky." The student hums a few notes and the class laughs.

Another student points out, "But that's because they were coming up to a commercial. The music tells you something's going to happen, so you don't touch that remote."

"Well, yeah," says the previous student, "and that's why this mysterious Mr. Mustache is arriving right now too."

"He's arriving in the story *because* there's a commercial break?" questions the teacher, and the discussion briefly touches on the relationship between plot and format in commercial media.

The class watches a few more excerpts from other series, before using these observations to synthesize a "grammar" of the language of television drama.

The second class is a group of fourteen-year-olds; everyone in this class has been identified as "gifted." They have read, on their own, a number of short stories from various anthologies. Each student has chosen one story to "present" with a partner to the rest of the class. "Presenting" first means summarizing, since no one will have read every story. Presenters then go on to discuss a number of the usual literary elements, including characterization, type of narration, and symbolism. They have had several days to prepare this work.

As a guest watching their presentations, I am struck by the infectious enthusiasm and verbal sophistication of these young people who are "intellectually" (whatever that means) in the top five to ten percent of the population. Most are avid readers, and although this project was largely self-directed, they have benefited from the instruction of their teacher up to this point in the course and from all their previous years in language arts classes. They know how to talk about stories.

And yet, something seems missing. I can't put my finger on it until, late in the class, two girls stand up to report on a story in which the narrative is conspicuously twisted. The events of the story-line are reordered and told by a first-person narrator who wasn't even born when the main plot was unfolding and who describes herself as preferring hard facts, even as she relates events that clearly beg for difficult ethical assessments. One might say layers of filters come between the reader and

the events. The girl who begins the discussion mentions the narrative form matter-of-factly, then continues reassuringly, "So we're going to straighten out the story and tell it to you in the proper order." She does so, and that story proves fascinating for her classmates, who ask thoughtful questions about the characters and events. Several students who have not read the story obviously now intend to—they copy down the title of the anthology in which it was found. The issue of the narrative filter is never again raised by the girls: it is as if the narration were a mildly puzzling aberration, one of those odd things that writers sometimes do, best peeled away and discarded so that we can look at the "real" story. No one else in the room, including the teacher, questions this.

In fact, as I think back, I realize that none of the other presentations has addressed this kind of question either. I have noticed it this time only because these girls have gone so far as to draw attention to the issue of narration, before dismissing it. No other group even mentions such an issue: the universal inclination, it seems, is to pass unconsciously through the telling, as if through an invisible atmosphere, in order to get to the plots and characters, which are treated as if they were real things happening to real people.

These are quite different lessons, and no easy comparison is possible, but one thing in particular interests me: the first class was, as a matter of course, discussing an aspect of culture that seemed invisible to the second class. They were explicitly aware that the artifacts they were examining—samples of television dramas—were constructions. It was clear to them that although these dramas attempted to achieve a "realistic" style, they were not reality itself, but representations. The class could talk about what they imagined the work of real police to be, easily recognize that there must be differences between that and the work of TV police, and explore reasons for those differences. They were coming to understand that specific media and genres have codes or familiar habits of representation and that those codes, like other languages, have no simple connection with reality.

The second class, on the other hand, treated the short story as a direct conduit to another reality. Once transported to that other world, it seemed, one could visit the inhabitants, comment on their lives, and wonder what one might do in their place. I am reminded of "time travel" machines in old science fiction movies. The hero stepped into the apparatus, pulled a lever, and lights flashed; at the end of the ride, the hero stepped out into another world, where the real action began. The audience was not expected to inquire too persistently about the workings of

the machinery. It was just one of the miracles of future science: it didn't much matter *how* the equipment worked, as long as it *did*. The "machinery" or "apparatus" of literature seemed similarly outside the notice of students in the second class. The difference, of course, is that there isn't a "real" world to step into at the end of the literary ride—the ride is all. No matter how much we praise writers for "transporting" us to another world, a piece of literature is only a representation, just as much a construction as anything on TV. The students in the short story class, with their above-average intelligence, certainly "knew" that a writer had crafted this representation. What is significant is that they didn't see this—which we can call "textuality"—as matter for exploration in an English classroom.

Now, I don't want to oversimplify *why* there was a difference between the two classes. The first teacher was at the front of the room leading the media lesson, whereas the other teacher was observing student work more or less passively. I suppose the second teacher could have intervened with a probe that might well have redirected the focus. What I find interesting, however, is that years of school talk about stories had not inclined these bright students to raise on their own any questions about pieces of literature as textual artifacts, whereas that seems to come naturally to students down the hall in the media lesson. It is not something that students this age can't do. These were fourteen-year-olds, but my sense is that blindness to textuality remains a feature of literary study throughout the years of secondary school. The same phenomenon, for example, has been recorded at the senior level in British schools (Mitchell 1994).

It's not as if students in the media lesson were doing something that required a lot of brain power. On the contrary, I would argue that, in the sample quoted above, all the student comments are pretty easy and obvious; the short story class's discussion of character was much more penetrating within its narrower limits. The easiness is perhaps one key to understanding what's going on. It *is* easy to identify the broadly drawn generic characteristics of most popular media, whereas many pieces of classroom literature have a more subtle relationship to the genres from which they spring. This effect is deepened by the fact that students have seen thousands of hours of television. It is easier to spot patterns when you have seen that many examples. By comparison, students have a relatively narrow experience of the adult or early adult fiction they are now expected to read. (They have, however, been exposed to the world of "stories," in the largest sense, including children's literature and media stories.)

None of this would adequately explain reluctance of teachers to raise these questions, but reluctance there must be. The silence of that class on the issue of textuality suggests that they have, over the years, internalized their teachers' agendas—agendas that have not included an investigation of stories *as stories*, stories as constructed representations. This isn't surprising, since we are still in part living the legacy of those nineteenth-century schoolmasters who saw literature as secular scriptures guiding the growth of moral character. With that kind of mission, you're hardly likely to encourage students to scrutinize your "scriptures" as artifact.

Of course, it's a delight to see a bright class enthusiastically discussing literature. Many of us would count that short story class as an English teacher's dream, and why would we want to diminish that thrill of imaginative engagement? Surely, however, right near the center of an English teacher's job description ought to be an expectation that we will put into students' hands tools for *understanding how texts work*. That is not happening when students pass unconsciously through the web of textuality on their way to "virtual reality."

When I speak of textuality as a "web," I deliberately echo an image from the previous chapter. The individual *person* can be understood only in reference to a location in a social web, a location described by a set of statements of sameness and difference. ("I'm like these people, but not like those.") Similarly, the individual *text* takes its place within a cultural web of all the representations the reader has experienced, and this web grows by the addition of each new text.

For example, when I read the final bloody scenes of Macbeth raging on the battlefield, I may connect it with a climactic rampage in a Rambo movie, and that is my way of understanding what is happening in this showdown between the individual and the collective. Still, I know Macbeth is not Rambo, not only because Rambo is on the side of good, but also because *Macbeth* has been created by Shakespeare, which makes it like *Twelfth Night*, which I read last year, and is therefore part of the "high culture" endorsed by schoolteachers; but then again it is not *Twelfth Night* either because it is not a comedy. If later I read a classic quest story, I may learn that there is a long tradition of the hero ritualistically arming before a decisive battle, and this will give new resonance to my memory of the scene in which Macbeth calls for his armor and probably also to my next viewing of a Batman movie. (If, on the other hand, I were to read something that had absolutely no connections to anything I had ever read or seen, that new text would be literally meaningless. Some works of literary theory approach this condition.)

In this way we spin a web, and it is the teacher's job to help the web become as full and intricately articulated as possible, and to help students reflect on the existence of the web and the principles upon which it is woven. Before we lose ourselves in that metaphor, let's remind ourselves that the "web" is the accumulated experience of "texts" that students bring to the activity of "reading." To direct students' attention to that experience and activity is to draw attention to meaning-making, and specifically to its embeddedness in contexts. We have, then, two principles: (a) a "text" is not a simple pipeline to reality, but a constructed representation of reality; and (b) the construction works "intertextually," by pulling and twisting on threads that reach out to a wide range of textual experiences. Intertextuality will be explored further in the next chapter and its treatment of reading processes. In the rest of this chapter, I want to sketch ways in which we might begin to foreground textual artifice, to appreciate that texts are not reality, but rather *constructions*, *made* by someone and *used* by someone. First, however, I want to take you on a short side trip into the low-brow world of popular culture, for I am convinced we have to invite that media teacher into the mainstream English classroom in order to achieve the ends I have in mind.

Greeting the Barbarians

Near the beginning of the previous paragraph, "text" and "reading" are in quotation marks to indicate that I am using those words in a special sense. By "text" I also mean the products of mass media and popular culture, and therefore by "reading" I also mean viewing and listening. Having one word do service for all these types of representation draws attention to the necessity of keeping in mind the *whole* web.

Our training as teachers of English literature may have inculcated in us a conviction that popular culture is debased and shallow and that great works of literature are somehow better for the soul; in its most militant form this becomes a battle to preserve the citadel of high culture against the barbarians at the gate. (This is partly the legacy of the influential Cambridge critic F. R. Leavis, as described by Willinsky [1991].) I don't think we have to be so silly or dishonest as to pretend that we believe a situation comedy is as great a work of art as *King Lear*. We do, however, have to be clear about what we think our job is. Are we Warriors in a Crusade for High Culture? If so, why? Would that be because we believe that kind of Culture makes people superior moral beings? How then do we handle the inconvenient fact that the Nazi commanders in World War II were notorious connoisseurs of culture? Or, if we leave aside ethical questions, is it that we believe our job is to point the way to a more

refined manner and to good taste? And are we then comfortable with relegating literary understanding to the role of a status symbol, akin to the right choice of tailor and knowing which fork to use at a dinner party?

As an alternative, I am suggesting, as have others, that our mandate ought to be the study of textuality: how the network of representations works and how we work it. As Robert Scholes (1985) has said, we can no longer act as priests and priestesses, leading others in the worship of "verbal icons."

> Now we must learn instead to help our students unlock textual power and turn it to their own uses. We must help our students come into their own powers of textualization. We must help them to see that every poem, play, and story is a text related to others, both verbal pre-texts and social sub-texts, and all manner of post-texts including their own responses.(20)

This position isn't a denial that *King Lear* is "greater" than a situation comedy. It is, however, an assertion that ranking things on an aesthetic scale isn't the first item of educational business. If our students are really going to understand how meanings are made, remade, and put to use, then not only is it a disservice to literature to isolate it from the entire cultural context in which this work happens, but it is a disservice to students. If learners are to understand themselves as meaning-makers, they have to examine the ways in which their understandings are constructed, and that necessarily includes their engagement with popular culture as well as school culture. Initially, at least, that engagement is the background they bring to the reading of classroom texts: it is the context in which *King Lear* will or will not make sense to them.

At some point, examination of their own meaning-making will probably lead students to recognize limitations in their current perspectives—that's a characteristic of growth, after all—and engender new appreciation of many things, including perhaps Shakespeare. This is not to suggest that all along the covert intention of the teacher is to get students to reject mass culture. Media study has, in fact, suffered from that kind of didactic ploy: "Yes, we'll study popular culture, and what you'll learn is how terrible it all is." This puts the curriculum on a negative footing, a dubious strategy when the objects of study are quite often sources of pleasure and great personal identification for students. If we can keep clear that our purpose is the study of how meaning-making happens, then questions of appreciation and aesthetic quality can be discussed frankly and critically without turning them into the *raison d'être* or secret assumption of the curriculum; students can still be introduced to "great" texts, but "without a prior pledge of reverence" (Aronowitz and Giroux 1991, 22).

It is not, however, only a matter of bringing the *products* of mass culture into the English classroom. I'm actually much more interested in importing some of the *methods and concepts* of media study. David Buckingham and Julian Sefton-Green, in *Cultural Studies Goes to School* (1994), argue that media education shouldn't be just another topic for the English classroom, along with poetry and the novel, or a specialist option for a few interested students: "we believe that it represents a challenging, contemporary version of English teaching, that should be at the heart of the subject rather than a mere bolt-on extra" (6). If the work being done in media classrooms points to understandings of textuality that should be brought to mainstream English programs, then we need to think about some of the special features of those media classes, and what directions they suggest for our work with literature. I'm going to focus on three concepts—non-transparency of texts, institutional contexts, and audience uses of texts. In each case, I'll summarize how the issue can be handled in a media class, and how it might look if we were to bring that treatment to our more traditional literary materials.

Non-transparent Constructions

British media education guru Len Masterman (1993) speaks of a "first principle" of media study—the principle of "non-transparency," precisely the element that seemed absent from the short story classroom visited at the beginning of this chapter.

> [The principle of non-transparency] insists that the media are rather more than simple "windows on the world" or "mirrors" which reflect external reality in a way which needs no further explanation. It insists that TV, newspapers, films, radio and advertisements are actively *produced*. They are involved, that is, in a process of *constructing* or *representing* reality rather than simply transmitting or reflecting it. (5)

If we choose to retain the "window on the world" metaphor, we must admit that all windows limit (as well as enhance) our vision: they have a frame and a position on one side of the building only. The glass in the window may be dusty, scratched, tinted, or distorting.

Students can be engaged in considering the implications of this principle by as simple a task as imagining that they are yearbook photographers assigned the job of snapping one—only one—photo of their class in action. What would that one picture be? The teacher at the front of the room? Students listening? Students busy at written work? Discussing among themselves? A sample piece of work? A revealing shot of a stu-

dent dozing at the back of the room? No matter which shot the photographer chooses, the others are omitted. What you have will be only a still photo: all the movements, sounds, and smells that are part of life will be excluded. The class will not be *presented* in the yearbook; it will be *represented* by someone's choice of how to construct a version of its reality. And this is exactly what happens when a news event is represented by one photo in the newspaper, or by a half column of print, or by a sixty-second TV news item.

The next step is to apply this concept to various media. What are we allowed to "see" about family life from a situation comedy, a TV drama, a Norman Rockwell painting, a sociology textbook, a parenting magazine, or a novel? What frames and built-in filters does each medium bring to its subjects? What topics seem invisible because of those filters? For example, television naturally prefers the visually exciting, which is why environmental issues received hardly any TV attention until activists learned to stage highly visible events. This situation isn't inherently *bad.* Individual photos can be hauntingly evocative, and it makes no more sense to complain about television being obsessed with images than it does to complain about compact discs having a lot of sounds on them. The point is that if we're going to be mature users of media, we have to recognize that each medium has its own ways of constructing realities, ways which offer both limitations and opportunities.

If we apply that kind of thinking to the traditional content of English programs, we find ourselves in the study of genres and conventions. It is a conceit of literary realism that it offers a "window on life as it really is," but what is outside the limits of that window's frame? What can you do with a poem that you can't do with a novel? What happens when you take an idea from an essay and turn it into a play script? Prose fiction allows reorganization of chronology and choice of narrator. What are the implications of that? After generations of teachers sermonizing about Shakespeare's "universality," do we dare ask what Shakespearean drama *cannot* represent?

Naturally, these questions yield more interesting and complex answers when grounded in comparisons of specific texts, which means materials on the course have to be chosen and organized to encourage comparison. We all know about genre-based organization—one month on short stories, one month on poetry, one month on Shakespeare—that sometimes succeeds in making sure nothing relates to anything else. We are also, of course, familiar with "thematic" organizations of English courses, but the crucial question is, "What are we paying attention to?" In one kind of thematic planning, the teacher gathers works on a com-

mon theme ("alienation," "growing up," or whatever) and students look *straight through* those different media and genres in order to pay attention to the theme. A textually aware approach, on the other hand, uses that common theme also as a way of casting our attention back to the workings of the genres themselves. We can use a story and a picture to study "alienation," but we can also use "alienation" to study how stories and pictures work. The latter approach recognizes that "knowledge" of social issues is seldom if ever direct and unmediated, and embraces the task of examining how textual mediation occurs.

Institutions

Mass media is an industry, subject to large movements of capital, market pressures, and government regulation. The media student, ideally, is aware of social and economic factors that impinge on the kinds of representations available. It would obviously be naive to imagine that popular music comes into our homes just because a musician somewhere thought it would be nice to sing us a song; media education assumes that students need to know something of what goes on to bring music and audience together.

In practice, this can be a difficult area for the media teacher. Understandably, we rely on textbooks for information about the business of media, but the field is nothing if not current and volatile. The long production time required by textbooks renders most of them out-of-date before they arrive in the classroom. Once an expensive book does arrive, we expect to use it for ten or more years; this leaves students condemned to reading chapters about music promotions and film marketing that happened two decades earlier. One solution is for the class to become media scavengers, on the look-out for current institutional issues that lend themselves to research and discussion. In the aftermath of the Persian Gulf War, there was a flurry of media self-examination, including articles on how the producers of high-tech weaponry had corporate links with major news sources that spotlighted military technology. Periodic takeover bids among media giants can also be counted on to spark articles listing current holdings of major companies, and Internet resources put a great deal of corporate information within reach of students. Similarly, debates about censorship and government regulation regularly flare up.

I don't feel compelled to be absolutely thorough about any of these issues: we can't, in any case, and knowing Disney's precise corporate holdings this week isn't as important as understanding the general principle that there *are* institutional questions that do make a difference.

Sometimes this can be achieved as easily through classroom simulations. For example, in a media class, I pose the case of a (fictitious) local television station whose educational, family orientation appears to be driving its ratings down. The task is to find a way of rescuing the station. Proposals are prepared by student teams, each of which has an assigned identity. One group might be a production company with plans for a police action drama, another a group of concerned parents. When the class gathers to examine everyone's proposals, we find ourselves wrestling with problems of corporate decision making that have impact on local culture.

Buckingham and Sefton-Green (1994) observe that one of the most striking differences between media studies and English is the latter's lack of concern for institutional questions (133–34). It is as if the relationship between reader and author is a purely personal matter and the book ends up in the reader's hands just because someone felt like telling a story—in other words, exactly the naive assumption that would be challenged if it appeared in a classroom discussion of the Rolling Stones. You may counter, "But the Rolling Stones are big business." Yes, and have you looked lately at the book trade, dominated as it is by huge national and multinational corporations? Or, in particular, at the school textbook industry?

Now, before I exasperate my readers, I had better hasten to declare that I'm not trying to turn English into a Business Practices course. I have no taste for making these questions a *big* part of the program when we have so many other exciting things to do, but I am saying that these issues ought to be mentioned occasionally. Reverence for capital "C" Culture can create a myth that literature is a sacred text, above mundane commercial concerns, but that is misleading, and students ought to hear at least a passing hint about how the world of culture really works.

At present, this hint is most likely to be heard when we talk about the conditions under which Shakespeare's plays were written and performed. Knowing that the Elizabethan theater catered to a wide spectrum of social classes explains some things about the range of styles in a Shakespearean play, and raises questions about the place of theater in our own time. (Standing room at an original performance of *Romeo and Juliet* cost no more than a beer; today's theater is expensive entertainment for the wealthy. A book, on the other hand, would have cost a year's wages for an Elizabethan worker, if he or she could have read it.) I am suggesting that that kind of information, perhaps gleaned from editors' introductions and biographies, could be more frequently brought into our discussions, because it *does* make a difference to the kinds of things

that happen with texts. The student who groans, "Were these Victorian novelists being paid by the word?" ought to find out about the influence of nineteenth-century lending libraries and their pressure for novels in the lucrative three-volume format.

We might as well start with the institution closest to home—the educational establishment which has to a great extent defined what we call "literature." As schools slowly begin to include works outside the traditional canon of "dead white male authors," we can raise questions about this history: "Who decided those old lists? On what basis? Why are they changing *now*?" Once again, simulations can offer glimpses of institutional debates. Students can role-play curriculum superintendents having to cut books from the course's reading list: which titles would stay, which would fall under the ax, and with what rationale? Where public objections have been raised to the study of a particular title, let that debate enter classroom discussion. (Students are usually staunch defenders of their own freedom to read; it may be necessary to force them to grasp the objecting point-of-view by assigning it as a role-playing exercise.) At its best, this kind of work raises important questions about the role of literacy in education for a modern society, and is that not worth discussing?

Audience

When English teachers speak of "audience," they usually mean a semifictitious entity the writer is supposed to keep in mind. ("If you're writing for an audience of your friends, you can say things that you wouldn't say to a prospective employer.") After this shadowy figure is briefly acknowledged, attention reverts pretty quickly to the writer and the text.

When media teachers speak of "audience," they mean a more complicated concept that needs thoughtful analysis. It is understandable that this interest would spring first from media education, with its recognition of the commercial foundations of mass culture. Since a media text is obviously a product marketed for consumers, it makes sense to ask, as marketers do, who those consumers are and what they're doing with the product. This leads initially to demographic approaches, which ask who is watching what on television. (I still have my students conduct audience surveys and analyze the results.) The graphs and statistics of demographers, however, have turned out to offer only passing interest for media education, largely because they reduce audiences to anonymous statistics and fail to address the more profound question of what *meanings* are being made by those audiences. Once we see audience and text engaged

in a meaning-making transaction, two interrelated questions arise. First, how and to what extent is the audience constructing the text? Second, how and to what extent is the text constructing its own audience?

There is a simple view of mass media that refuses to acknowledge the audience's active role in meaning-making, that sees TV as something that is done to us, the passive victims. In this view, the role of media education is to warn innocents against the evil giant. This has been called the "inoculation" approach, as if mass media were a disease. Such thinking leads to a pedagogy that is fundamentally condescending to students (by assuming they are manipulated dupes in need of demystification) and flattering to teachers (by casting them as enlightened liberators who have themselves escaped the snares of popular culture). (See Sefton-Green 1990, 130, and Buckingham and Sefton-Green 1994, 126.) While teachers may believe they are nurturing independent thought, these kinds of assumptions are most likely to reward students who come closest to simply replicating the supposedly enlightened teacher's position.

Some will claim that the media are turning us into mindless zombies, but the reality is probably a less passive model of transaction between audience and text. The editors of *Relocating Cultural Studies* point out:

> It is arguable that Michael Jackson's *Thriller* album was successful, not because it contained an inherent set of values or meanings that slavishly hypnotized 40,000,000 consumers across the world, but because it offered up a complex cultural medium in which 40,000,000 consumers could successfully invest meanings that, although complexly negotiated, remained nonetheless distinctively local. (Blundell et al. 1993, 8)

When people watch television, lots of things may be happening. They may be passing idle time, socializing with friends or family, escaping family, or looking for relaxation after a stressful day. They may be viewing with cynical amusement, or looking for role models, or because they like the looks of the main actor. All this makes it impossible to ignore the audience(s) and say, "Here's the inherent message of this show." Whatever the scriptwriters or directors may have had in mind, the actual meanings of that "text" have to do with the uses to which it is put by viewers. One of the most dramatic examples of this in recent years would have to be audience interpretations of the media-saturated O. J. Simpson trial, which seemed to be understood in starkly different ways by white and black audiences in America. Even that kind of breakdown along racial, gender, economic, or any other single criterion is probably simplistic. We simultaneously belong to many different audiences. In *Television Culture*, John Fiske (1987) points out that we are not *an* audience, but rather plu-

ral audiences: "our social system is crisscrossed by axes of class, gender, race, age, nationality, region, politics, religion, and so on" (17).

To bring that kind of awareness to the literature classroom means helping students recognize ways in which their own "situatedness" as audience affects the readings they construct. A useful way of doing this is to push them to consider constructions other than their own. When my senior students read a set of essays about social concerns (articles about the homeless and about menial labor), I ask them to write "personal" responses, but *not* as themselves. Rather, they react in assigned roles as labor leaders, business owners, homeless people, ultraconservative politicians, feminists, and so on. They then gather in mixed groups to discuss, still in role, these responses. After reflecting on this process, students are in better positions to understand their own participation as an audience—their readings and uses of texts.

Incidentally, let us not forget that audience "uses" for texts often include pleasure in its many varieties, even though our moralizing tendency has sometimes made it hard for English and media teachers to deal frankly with the issue of pleasure. Campy B movies can be downright fun to watch, and it's worth asking why, without condescension.

To this point, we have been talking about audiences determining readings and uses of texts; the other side of the "negotiation of meaning" lies in the way texts work to construct audiences. Gunther Kress (1995) compares the front page of a London tabloid, all screaming headline and blown-up photo, with an old-fashioned newspaper crammed with small print, and argues, "Over time, insistently, the habituated readers of *The Sun* and of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* become different readers" (84). That is, they come to have different expectations and uses for textuality, and these mind-sets—these audiences—have been created by the newspapers themselves.

For any text, we can ask students what kind of ideal audience is being constructed. Who does this story think its readers are? Who would it like them to be? What does it assume about the reader's attitudes, values, and prejudices, and about the best ways of trying to change those attitudes? Or *is* it trying to change the reader at all? We can then compare our responses as actual audience: do we willingly allow the text to construct us in the shape of its ideal reader, or do we find ourselves resisting at some points? Should we? Marxist and feminist critics have for some time enacted the possibility of audience resistance by constructing readings that expose and critique the ideologies of canonical works, but this form of reading is still uncommon in high school literature classes, though commonplace in media lessons. This difference is no doubt symp-

tomatic of the school assumption that literature is good for you and should be absorbed, while the mass media are bad and must be resisted. However, in every century, a great deal of claptrap about race, class, and gender finds its way into even the greatest authors, and a "love of literature" should not interfere with healthy critical awareness, which demands that the audience clarify who exactly they are, so that they can map out their stance in relation to the text.

Like many issues in textuality, the question of audience is often best approached by comparing two related texts. Harper Lee's 1960 classic *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a staple of English programs, and teachers sometimes accompany it with clips from the movie of the same name, released two years after the novel. Some of the differences between these two treatments reflect the built-in capacities of fiction and film, respectively, but other differences seem to point to differently conceived audiences for the two works. The movie, for example, repeatedly suggests that the Finches' neighbor, Miss Maudie, is a kind of substitute for Scout's dead mother: she shows up for breakfast on Scout's first day of school, much to the surprise of classes who have just read the novel. ("What's *she* doing there?!") In Harper Lee's original text, if there is a substitute mother, it is the maid Calpurnia, but someone apparently decided that a movie audience couldn't accept a black servant as a substitute mother in a white home—a premise that was presumably acceptable to the audience for the Pulitzer prize-winning novel. Racial anxiety shows up again in the reports of the black Tom Robinson's death. In the novel, Tom is viciously cut down by seventeen bullets from the guns of prison guards; in the movie, we hear that one deputy shoots, intending only to wound, but tragically misses his aim. Perhaps the filmmakers believed their audience needed a softer picture of white southern justice than Harper Lee offered her readers. Let's not oversimplify what's going on here: we can, with our students, wonder whether this is a case of texts *reflecting* their audiences, *shaping* audiences, or *perpetuating* audience attitudes.

With all this talk about media other than books, I may seem to be arguing for a rude displacement of literature from its honored position at the center of English studies, but what needs to happen is a careful rethinking of our handling of literary texts. To quote Robert Scholes (1985) again, we must "open the way between the literary or verbal text and the social text in which we live," "breaking the hermetic seal around the literary text" (24). This opening will indeed lead to repositioning, but it will be a repositioning that enhances the study of literature by *clarifying its relationships* with the rest of the world. Relationships, after all, are

what this chapter has been about. By foregrounding textuality, we help students clarify their relationships with texts, recognizing texts as substances instead of ghostly transparencies. In examining how meaning is constructed, students study the relationships of individual text to its significant contexts. These contexts include other works (both humble and exalted, visual and verbal), the institutions within which the text is generated and circulated, and the audiences who negotiate meanings with that text. As Jack Thomson (1992) has pointed out, a key proposition in contemporary literary theory is that "the meaning of a story changes according to who is telling it to whom, when and where (23)"; we might add, "why." Thus, the work is not revered as an isolated (and possibly dusty) icon, but rather regarded as one item in the ongoing fabrication of a web of culture.

4 Unlocking Reading Processes

[T]exts are lazy machineries that ask someone to do part of their job.

Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader* (1979)

In my own experience, I have lived through many years of being an invisible reader.

Graduate student quoted in Harold A. Vine Jr. and Mark A. Faust, *Situating Readers* (1993)

My Grade Twelve English teacher—this would be in the late 1960s—handed out copies of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and told us to read the book in three weeks, after which time we would begin discussions. I read the novel happily, but the ensuing classwork left me with the bitter realization that I somehow must have got it all wrong, for the things that seemed important to the teacher had not occurred to me while I was reading. I was now reduced to making humble notes on literary features I had failed to notice on my own. Whatever this exercise may have taught me about the preoccupations of literary criticism, it taught me nothing about how to read, since the reading—my primary reading—was already finished before instruction began. Reading processes were not on the agenda.

English teachers have come to understand that teaching writing means paying attention to what goes on while people write. Gone are the days, we hope, when a teacher would hand out a writing task to be taken home and magically submitted in final form two weeks later. We have turned our attention to the question of how the writing process unfolds. An exciting development in English teaching is the growing interest in paying that same kind of attention to reading processes.

As Peter Elbow (1990) has pointed out, although teachers have learned to *write* with students, sharing with them our drafts and false starts, we haven't yet firmly committed ourselves to *reading* with students, revealing to them our confusions, hesitations, and wild goose chases as we encounter a brand new text (132). In the usual model of literature instruction, the teacher carefully prepares readings before entering the classroom, thus preventing students from ever seeing what a skilled, mature reader actually does during the process of constructing a read-

ing. In contrast, some of the most exciting lessons I have ever conducted have been based on a class examining together—live, on the spot—a short story or poem that none of us had studied in advance, teacher and students sharing the excitement and discovery of collaboratively building a reading.

The most obvious sign of the new interest in reading processes is the common use of journals in which students track their responses while reading. But I have become uneasy about the unexamined use of these journals. Teachers need clear understanding of what we ought to be encouraging in responses, and what should be our roles as reading instructors. We are sometimes uncertain about what to do with responses once we get them, which results in the widespread use of response only as a preliminary motivational device (Applebee 1993, 201). "My, isn't that an interesting reaction," we say, then clear our throats and shift to more traditional analysis. Response writing that isn't woven into a purposeful sequence of activities is likely to degenerate into a mechanical gesture. We should heed observations that much journal writing may consist of unexamined self-indulgence rather than the higher thinking for which teachers hope (Anderson 1992). Furthermore, there ought to be a variety of ways of opening up reading processes: if the response journal is almost the only strategy we ever use, it will surely become tiresome and predictable. As Bill Corcoran (1988) warns, "The literature journal runs the risk of becoming yet another school genre, like a book report for the sake of a book report" (40).

What we need, then, is a coherent theory or map of what happens during reading, so that we may adjust and refine the use of journals, as well as generate other, complementary activities. We need to unlock reading processes, making them available for students' understanding, practice, and experimentation, encouraging them to become aware of themselves as readers.

Fortunately, this need has been partly answered by the emergence of reader-response theory. English teachers of my generation or earlier have sometimes resisted the response movement. Educated as we were by professors who were themselves steeped in the "New Criticism" of the 1940s and 1950s, we are wary of slipping into the chaos of subjectivity. We may feel irritated by the poorly read student who asserts, "Hey, I've got a right to my opinion," and some of us have mocked response methodology by portraying it as a surrender to anarchy—"Whatever the reader feels, is right." This, however, is an unfair parody. Turning our attention to what happens inside readers doesn't mean mutely accepting whatever the student happens to think. You and I are trained readers and educa-

tors, and it is our responsibility to intervene, challenge, and enrich our students' readings. We listen intently to the student's response, not because it's inviolable, but because that's where the action is, where reading instruction can take place.

Response theory and practice may be able to ward off accusations of weak-headed relativism, but another kind of challenge is not so easily answered. That is the charge that response methodology has nourished the narcissistic narrowness of English studies, that it has made us priests in the cult of the individual which I criticized in Chapter 2. The new field of cultural criticism holds that it is a debilitating blindness to poke around obsessively in personal response without widening our scope and asking what cultural factors have shaped that response, and what cultural consequences attend our readings.

To be fair, it must be said that well-known exponents of response approaches do sometimes acknowledge contextual concerns, but often in ways that allow such concerns to fade into the background when it comes time for classroom implementation. Louise Rosenblatt's *Literature as Exploration* (first published in 1938) and *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* (1978) have deservedly become canonical works for secondary teachers interested in reader response, and it is interesting to see how Rosenblatt makes it possible for teachers to back away from questions about how contexts shape readings. *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* opens with a memorable image: "on a darkened stage I see the figures of the author and the reader, with the book . . . between them" (1). Rosenblatt goes on to say that literary study has historically aimed a spotlight on either the author or the book, while her "transactional" approach focuses that light on what goes on between the reader and the book. From the point of view of cultural criticism, what is striking about this analogy is the way it begs the question of what we would see if the *rest* of the stage lights were also to come up, revealing what *else* is on the platform. Later, Rosenblatt uses another metaphor: "The poem" comes into being in the live circuit set up between the reader and "the text." As with the elements of an electric circuit, each component of the reading process functions by virtue of the presence of the others. (14)

I like the image of electric circuitry, but in the "wired" 1990s we inevitably picture circuits—like communication networks—as systems more complex than this model of one reader, one text. We want to fish out and examine the larger mesh of connected "wiring." Rosenblatt knows that readers and texts are always located in a "complex social nexus," but she says all that gets absorbed by "magic" into the "unique" reader and "unique" text and, it seems, needs little further thought (18–

20). I think we have to resist the apparent ease of that move: the working of contexts is not "magic," but rather something we should stop to consider. For Rosenblatt, especially in *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*, situational factors always seem incidental, something to be transcended: yes, individual consciousness is part of "a network of interrelationships with its environing social and natural matrix," but, we are told, we must peel away "layer after layer" of such matters and return to the "inexorably personal component" (174–75).

A more culturally oriented reading pedagogy would argue that such appeals to the "unique" and "personal" may cut short our investigations before we have had a chance to question the origins of responses. When students from different parts of the world read the same story, substantial variations in understandings emerge, and those variations are predictable according to the reader's culture (Patterson et al. 1994, O'Neill 1994). There is nothing "unique" about responses when they turn out to be shared by many other people. Arguably, each culture makes available certain kinds of meanings to its members, and even if we resist those offered meanings, our very resistance has been shaped by other cultural influences, including sub- and counter-cultures. In its most extreme form, this line of thinking challenges the possibility of *any* uniquely personal response, since we could theoretically track down the cultural source of any meaning, and what we call "authentic response . . . can in actuality only be a combination of cultural and textual positions" (Patterson et al. 1994, 69).

We have, then, two lines of thought leading to theoretical extremes. The extreme reader-response argument ultimately leads to a hypothetically unique, "inexorably personal" essence of response. This supposition fits cosily within prevailing individualist and humanist assumptions. It fits less well with the classroom reality of students tacking together attitudes harvested from the various cultural sets to which they belong. The project of the teacher, in this model, is to help students peel away those distracting layers of borrowed response in order to find the irreducibly personal component. On the other hand, cultural criticism, at its extreme, hypothesizes that individual response is absolutely reducible to a list of situational influences. Claiming that something in one's response is "personal" is, in this view, just a way of disguising the fact that we haven't yet made the list of influences long enough to cover every facet of response, or that we haven't yet uncovered all the interactive chemistry of influences. The task of the teacher is to help make the list longer and to help students examine the interactions of different factors. This model has the contemporary appeal of what we might call "ecological sophistication"—it

recognizes that everything is linked to something else—but any will or agency in the individual reader seems in danger of disappearing with the snap of a theoretical finger.

Fortunately, we don't have to position ourselves as warriors for either extremity. Our role as classroom teachers doesn't require us to pretend that we have settled vexing philosophical questions about the human mind. It does require us to think as carefully as we can about what might actually help real students do a better job of handling real texts. This practical path may be found by threading our way through both camps, as long as we keep our eyes open and don't blindly paste together contradictory strategies.

It is apparent, I think, that the actual readings constructed by students are indeed assembled from possibilities made available by their cultural circumstances. This is known by any teacher who ever noticed, for example, that girls often respond to science fiction differently than boys, or that black students may be troubled by *Huckleberry Finn* in ways that aren't initially shared by white readers. This cultural shaping isn't some kind of "contamination" to be shed, in search of a "purer" stance. These factors are what make people what they are: these readers are, in fact, reading from their individuality, an individuality built from the materials of gender, race, age, social class, location, and so on. If we include "schooling" in this list of cultural factors, we might suspect that responses that seem more deeply individual or more purely literary, may only be responses that have been more thoroughly influenced by the culture of the English classroom. I certainly read student journals that make me think the writer has learned how to "sound personal" or "sound literary." If we want students to understand and gain control over their reading processes, then surely all this needs to be an explicit part of what gets studied in English classes.

That means it's good but *not enough* to say, "We want to hear your personal response." We have to go on to say, "We'd like you to think about what in your background and circumstances is affecting that response, and while you're at it, we'd like you to work hard at thinking about what might be the responses of others who don't share your circumstances."

On the other hand, we don't have to let this interest in influences lure us into pretending that we're sure *everything* can be reduced to cultural factors. To imply that there is no residue of personal agency in reading—that readers are nothing but passive receivers of influence—would be a strange way of trying to hand over active textual power to students. It is pedagogically healthier to think in terms of back-and-forth transactions with culture. Yes, potential meanings and interpretations are given

to us, prepackaged, by virtue of our situations, but we still have room to work with how we unwrap and assemble those givens, what we choose to magnify and what we choose to resist. We could, I suppose, philosophize away this vestige of personal responsibility, but in the practical world of education, *this*, it seems, is where there is room for growth, where there is something we can teach, where there is power for learners to grasp.

Within this framework, then, we can ask what kinds of things happen when we read, which aspects of reading can profitably be foregrounded in the classroom—in short, we can begin to unlock reading processes. I'm going to concentrate on seven aspects of reading that lend themselves to classroom exploration and practice. Readers (1) adjust memories and expectations over time, (2) build conceptual structures, (3) visualize images, (4) make connections with other texts, (5) make connections with their own lives and beliefs, (6) fill in gaps to build consistency, and (7) pry open gaps to achieve critical distance.

A Process in Time

Traditional criticism often assumed that the moment-by-moment experience of reading is a distraction, ultimately to be left behind in favor of understanding the "essence" of a work—an epiphany of the "work as a whole." A theorist such as Stanley Fish (1980), on the other hand, points out that the experience of working through a text in time—with all its confusions, surprises, and shifting demands—is, in fact, the real experience of literature. The physical form of a book may deceive us into thinking of it as a stationary object, but while we are reading, we are in a process that unfolds in time (83–85).

Wolfgang Iser, in *The Act of Reading* (1978), offers a description of this process. According to Iser, while we read we look back in memory at the things we have already seen in the text, arranging the experience into meaningful patterns—patterns that must be constantly rearranged to accommodate the unfolding of new events. At the same time, we look forward in expectation, steadily forming and revising predictions about what might happen later. As Iser says, "Throughout the whole process there is a continual interplay between modified expectations and transformed memories" (111). In a sense, just as we draft a piece of writing, we also "draft" readings, working out understandings that are subject to revision. Just as written drafts may have to be substantially reworked, early expectations in a reading may have to be turned inside out: predictions may turn out to be wildly off base. (The idea of a "draft reading" that parallels draft writing is explored further in Tierney and Pearson [1984] and Straw [1990].)

Students can benefit from activities that deliberately focus on the interplay of memory and expectation. For example, to sharpen their sense of the way memory reconfigures a text, students might role-play detectives, finding new significance in previously noted details. To draw attention to the role of prediction, panels of student "experts" (modeled after television expert panels) can make and defend predictions about the story at hand. (Teams might specialize in tracing particular characters, anticipating their reactions to crucial events.) Even traditional approaches such as close analysis of selected passages can be applied to the task of tracing the workings of memory and expectation at the level of words and sentences succeeding each other. (Inviting students to lay out their early predictions assumes a classroom in which mistakes are not only tolerated, but positively welcomed, since a wrong prediction can look a lot like a mistake.) The point, of course, is not simply to dump a bunch of guesses on the table, but to examine where our predictions and hunches come from, demonstrating how reading happens, how we mobilize our understandings of life and literature, and how writers may play games with those expectations.

Here is an excerpt from a fifteen-year-old's journal response to the first four chapters of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird.* I had asked students to think especially about what they expected to happen later in the novel.

> I predict that the three kids are going to find out more information about the Radley house. Then they are going to go investigate. When they go inside either they will find Mr. Radley or what's left of him. In the end the Radley house mystery and the fear of the Radleys will be over. I have a feeling that I will enjoy reading this book. I know there will be a lot of action and mystery. The further I read the closer I get to revealing the mystery of the house.

Before reading further in the book, students explored the sources of this typical reading: the books, movies, and television shows that had prepared them for this kind of story. In the second half of the novel, of course, the Radley mystery recedes in importance, becoming a symbol from early childhood that foreshadows the real house of horrors—the Ewell shack—and the real monster (to the extent that there is an individual monster)—Bob Ewell. For the student quoted above, this meant having to review her early predictions, as we see in this later journal excerpt, after Ewell's attack on the Finch children.

> Finally! I *knew* there was going to be some action, and there was, and it did involve Boo Radley in a way, but not the way I thought. I guess you could say the writer tricked me, but not in a bad way. It's just like when you're a child some things seem more important

> then than they do later. Just like Jem and Scout, I was more like a child at the beginning of the book. That seems a long time ago now.

Shapes in Space

As they work their way through a text, good readers build a sense of overall patterns and structures that may suggest a spatial dimension to the work—as Iser says, "the illusion of depth and breadth" (116). We may begin to feel that there are "layers" to the work, or that bits cluster together in forms that beg for geographical or architectural analogies. Poor readers often have a difficult time building this sense of structure. For them, a story is just one thing after another, and nothing much coalesces out of the fog.

We can help our students find the "shapes" of meaning by emphasizing spatial understandings of what goes on in texts. Research in the last decade has documented the effectiveness of "semantic maps" or "visual organizers"—charts and diagrams, essentially— in helping readers make meaning. (See, for example, Jones et al. [1989] and Clarke [1991].)

Plot graphs and time lines—sometimes based on a "correct" version in the teacher's manual—have been with us for a long time, and articles on visual organizers sometimes think only in terms of teachers offering blank diagrams for students to fill in. However, after they have been briefly introduced to a variety of schematic possibilities, students can become inventive and insightful in finding ways to illustrate their concepts of a work's "shape": patterns of development, relationships, tension, and meaning. ("Draw a map of the character relationships up to this point in the novel. Add any extra notations or markings that you think necessary to make the map meaningful.") Conventional diagrams might include trees, webs, Venn diagrams, grids, continuums, spirals, and flow charts, and when students are set free to make their own shapes, I have seen remarkable new geometries and patterns, sometimes inspired by metaphors within the text. It's good to at least start this work as a collaborative activity, so that students get a chance to see lots of different ways of representing shapes and can release anxiety about finding "the shape the teacher wants." Diagramming can be especially useful as a repeated activity in a long work such as a novel, because the shapes may well be reconfigured over time. The whole pile of charts can be kept together, as visual evidence of the reading process, just as a writing folder holds evidence of the writing process.

Pictures in Your Head

When we read, we construct images. These images are often visual—we "see" things in our "mind's eye"—although, at times, the imagination may mobilize the other senses as well. This image building is part of what makes books come alive for good readers. It is important for us as reading teachers to realize that the images in a reader's mind are not merely decorative, but that they point to the meanings being construed. For example, I may have no picture at all of the color of a character's hair, but a precise image of the cigarette hanging from his fingers: the cigarette, presumably, carries meaning that the hair does not. The making of a mental image is linked to meaning, and only meaningful details are filled in (Iser 1978, 176–77). As a result, heightening students' awareness of the images created in their minds is a fast avenue to the examination of meaning.

As an introductory exercise, remind students of their five senses. Have them close their eyes and imagine a few common images, such as "snow," "city," "lake," or key images from something that is about to be read. Discuss what they imagine. (How many senses are involved? Where are you located in relation to the picture? External spectator? Participant? Do you know where this imagined scene comes from? Is it somewhere that you've been? A real place? A place in a picture? Are there emotions connected with it? How does your image compare with the images of other people in this class?)

After a reading, ask students to remember strong images evoked from that reading—not necessarily ones detailed by the author. Discuss these pictures as in the previous warm-up exercise. Students need to watch for the components of personal meaning in this image making, which, when recognized, can unlock exciting depths of response. ("You say you see a dusty floral carpet in the room in the poem? But that's not in the text. Where is it coming from? Your grandmother's sitting room? And what does your grandmother's room have to do with this poem?") They also need to see in their responses the role of shared, conventional imagery, and need to be alerted to the danger of letting purely idiosyncratic associations interfere with the reading process.

When a Grade Nine class had read partway through William Bell's novel *Crabbe*, we stopped to discuss memorable pictures. Everyone had a strong image of the moment at which the young protagonist, who is running away from home and doesn't know much about the outdoors, nearly dies when his canoe goes over a small waterfall. After we had all taken

time to jot down private notes about our images of this event, discussion showed that most of the class had "viewed" the accident from a distance, standing as a spectator on the ground, watching from the side. Despite the first-person narration, only a few readers were inside Crabbe's head, or over his shoulder, experiencing the fall with him. The class decided that the general tendency to see the accident from afar suggested emotional distance from the events; the few readers with close-up images agreed that they seemed to be identifying more closely with Crabbe's terror, in contrast to the more distant observers, who were witnessing events that were, to them, almost comic. Some recognized the visual influence of scenes from movies, both comic and serious. The class unanimously and forcefully insisted that Crabbe has dark brown hair, although this is not specified in the novel. Upon reflection, many agreed that this detail probably derived from the fact that Crabbe is intelligent and stereotypes of "dumb blondes" would interfere with his image. Interestingly, the majority of the class saw the river flowing from the right side to the left side of their mental "picture frames." They didn't know what to make of this oddly common element, and I decided it was time for some teacher intervention. I pointed out that western languages go from left to right across the page; this means that right to left movement may suggest something "reversed" or "wrong." (Students found my suggestion interesting, although, I suspect, not necessarily persuasive.)

Connections with Other Texts

We understand something new by fitting it into what we already know. We bring to each reading our experience of other literature, as well as memories of anecdotes, advertisements, film, and television. This meeting of the known and the new transforms both sides of the transaction: the new is understood in relation to the known, and the known will never be quite the same again, since it now has a new factor to include.

Students must be explicitly and insistently encouraged to make links between "texts" of whatever kind. Naturally, this is easier if core texts do have conspicuous points of connection, but the web of associations must spread beyond the classroom. The easiest activity is simply to brainstorm points of connection between the present text and others: "How is this like anything you've ever seen or read before?" And then, "So what makes this different from those other works?"

Sometimes a teacher will recognize that a passage has elements in common with other texts, while students are blind to the association.

Often there is not much to be gained by forcing the issue, but if seeing the link seems worth fighting for, the teacher might try disconnecting the passage from its present context—disassembling the text, to help students see it in a new light. It may help to read a passage and ask, "If you didn't already know the source of this paragraph, from where would you guess it to have come?" Even more radical disassembly can occur if students make lists of all "meaning-bearing" words in a passage (technically, the lexemes—nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs), and then group them into families of meaning or connotation. Temporarily discarding syntax and staring at piles of raw words can wake readers to the associations of diction—associations that enrich the reading process.

Students already know a lot about genres and conventions, and we can help them see what expectations and assumptions they bring to their reading by feeding them snippets of information about a work—the conspicuously conventional elements—*before* it is studied and asking them to create in advance a likely story line. For example, I wanted my students to see how Ibsen's *A Doll's House* plays with the conventions of nineteenth-century melodrama. One might think today's teenagers wouldn't know much about Victorian drama, but, of course, they do because those conventions are alive in contemporary culture, often as objects of parody. After I spent five minutes outlining the form, they were ready and eager to invent their own melodramatic story lines based on a list of elements I supplied from Ibsen's play: a dreaded document, a friend from the past, a man in a black cloak, financial difficulties, and so on. Aside from the exuberance with which they created and presented their mini-melodramas, the payoff came when we began reading *A Doll's House*. They were now more acutely aware of conventions and sensitive to Ibsen's subversion of the form. (See O'Neill [1992] and Mellor et al. [1992] for more examples and discussion of this kind of work.)

An article in the *English Quarterly* (Rogers 1990) reported on a study of Grade Nine reader responses. The researchers were looking for (among other things) connections with other texts—what they called "extratextual" responses—and disappointingly found that fewer than 10 percent of the responses were explicitly of this kind. This should warn us not to count on spontaneous development of the ability to mobilize knowledge of other stories: we have to intervene with instruction. When extratextual links are made the subject of concentrated instruction and practice, students do begin to make connections on their own—I've seen it happen—and for some, this awareness becomes a powerful new path into understanding what happens with texts.

Connections with Ourselves

Of course, readers bring to texts not only memories of previous reading, but also lifetimes of lived experience. We necessarily approach reading from the platform on which we are now standing, and that platform consists of our personal history and values. There is no such thing as an "ideal reader"—genderless, classless, ageless, and free of history. There are only real people, mired in all the limitations and richness of particular existence.

To be aware of ourselves as readers, we must acknowledge these personal platforms. That does not mean surrendering to subjectivity. Once we recognize how our values shape our readings, we are in a position to criticize those values, measure them against the values of others, guard against our prejudices, and celebrate or revise our values as appropriate. To engage students in this kind of thinking means inviting them to position themselves in relation to the values in the text, so that they are ultimately not merely reading the text, but also reading the world and reading themselves.

One result of the response movement is that students are sometimes asked to write about a situation in their own lives that connects in some way with the story at hand. Often this has been done *after* the reading, but some researchers (Smith and White 1993) suggest that relevant personal writing *before* the reading begins may be a surer way of bringing those memories to bear on the reading, making the personal writing more useful—ploughing the ground in advance, as it were. For example, before reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, students might write about a time when they discovered that someone was either better or worse than they had thought. Prior writing of this kind does make a difference to the reading; we should note with caution, however, that my example amounts to a teacher delivering an advance interpretation of what matters in the book. A more open topic ("a memory of childhood") would be less likely to preempt their own constructions of the novel's theme, but its vagueness would also make it less relevant as an advance tactic.

One way of getting students to recognize the role their values play in reading is to have them mull over what things they find most disturbing in a specific work or part of a work. Why do they find those most disturbing? What does that show about their values? How are those values different from their classmates' values? Why? On the other hand, what does character X from the story find most disturbing? Why?

The shift from a strictly personal response approach to a more culturally aware approach can be summarized as a change from simply asking, "How do you feel about this book?" to asking, "What factors in

your circumstances and background make you feel that way?" and "What are the possible readings and responses of other readers?" (Corcoran 1994; Mellor et al. 1992). As I described in Chapter 3, one way of helping students recognize their own situatedness is by having them make the effort to respond in role as specific kinds of readers. How would a labor unionist read *The Great Gatsby*? How does the parent of a runaway teenage girl read *Romeo and Juliet*? How might a Jew read *The Merchant of Venice*?

After my students had read and discussed a number of pieces of nonfiction, I asked them to choose one essay to which they had a strong response and analyze what it was in their own lives and backgrounds that shaped their interactions with the text. One student chose to write about an essay by Kildare Dobbs, published originally under the title "The Shatterer of Worlds." (Dobbs interviews a survivor of Hiroshima and reconstructs that day, in disturbingly concrete detail, from the point-of-view of a child.) The student's analysis focused on her own family upbringing. On the one hand, her mother had taught her that girls should care for others and be sympathetic to suffering, particularly the suffering of children. The grotesque horrors depicted in the essay were upsetting to this sensibility. On the other hand, her parents, born in Hong Kong, had themselves absorbed from their families strong postwar anti-Japanese sentiments: as long as she could remember, the student had been told stories of Japanese atrocities, and it was hard now to reverse this antipathy. Furthermore, Dobbs's essay explicitly shuns the statistics and analytic overviews of history textbooks, concentrating instead on immediate visceral experience, and my student realized that this concrete approach attracted her because it fed her current rebellion against her father's analytic, scientific mind-set. As she struggled to think her way through these strands, the student became increasingly perplexed about what her "own personal" response might be, amid this complex pattern of conflicting family culture.

Fitting It All Together: Filling in Gaps

As we work to make sense of what we read, we try to build consistency. We expect developing patterns to fit together into an increasingly stable whole, or gestalt. A simple exposition may assume for itself most of the responsibility for fitting things together, but a story or poem seldom unfolds with the same explicitness. As we read, piecing together fragments, we experience discontinuities, moments at which we have to bridge gaps of one kind or other. Gaps might appear, for example, between what the narrator says and what a character does; between what a character does in two different situations; between the end of one chap-

ter and the beginning of the next; or between the apparent tone of a passage and the use of odd or ironic diction to undermine that tone. (Students notice the discontinuity in tone between the two parts of *To Kill a Mockingbird*: the sudden shift from Part One's apparent playfulness to the more ominous mood of Part Two.) These gaps force the reader's involvement in the text. We find that we have to reconsider and remap the territory in response to what the text has done. It is for this reason that Stanley Fish (1980) says the important question to ask about a text is not "What does it *mean?*", but rather "What does it *do?*" (98). For Umberto Eco, in *The Role of the Reader* (1979), what the text does is force us to take "inferential walks" and fill in "ghost chapters" (214). Wolfgang Iser calls these discontinuities "blanks" and "negations," and sees in them the heart of the reader's participation in the text: each break creates "an articulate reading moment" when readers feel they must work to get their bearings (130).

I coach students to watch for and pursue little "snags" in reading—things that cause a moment's hesitation or confusion. What puzzles them as they read? Initially, this can be demonstrated with an oral reading of a short story or opening chapter of a novel; students interrupt the reading whenever they hit a snag. Reading means paying attention to the text but also *paying attention to one's own reactions.* Students need to learn to listen to and trust the inner voice of doubt and hesitation. Typically, poor readers distrust and repress this awareness: since lots of written material makes little sense to them anyway, they have difficulty learning to value their moments of confusion.

Students can also note and discuss words or phrases that stand out for whatever reason. Do some jump out on first reading, while others gain weight only later? Notice that finding words that "stand out for whatever reason" is different from finding the "important" words, which would imply a later stage in the process, when decisions about what is "important" have already been made. We want to move our instruction to the earlier stage, *before* decisions about "importance" have been settled, precisely to help students who cannot see how anyone makes those decisions.

Recognizing Constructedness: Prying Open Gaps

In the previous section, we were talking about "gaps" that can be closed with little inferential leaps. In its simplest form, this is what happens in film when the camera shows us someone approaching a building from a distance, then cuts to the person's hand on the front door. Once we are accustomed to the language of film, we don't need to see the character

taking every single step up to the door—we infer what must have happened. The inference is invited by the text.

There is another kind of omission that good readers spot. When we see a glamorous travel brochure for a place that we know, we may say, "They left out the slums and beggars that were all over the city when I was last there." At that point, we pry open a gap that the text would have left papered over. We are not simply accepting the brochure's invitation to draw inferences; our *critical* reading goes beyond anything authorized by the text. In the case of advertising, we all recognize that critical reading is a desirable skill. We teach students not merely to see what is on the page or screen, but also to ask what is *not* there, what has been omitted from the representation, and why.

English teachers have spent much less time asking that same question of "great literature." Partly this is a consequence of reverence for canonical works and the "insight into life" they have been assumed to offer. It also comes from the tradition of close textual analysis that focused an intense but narrow spotlight on the text itself. The question was always, "What is happening in this poem?", never "What is *not* happening in this poem?" However, if readers are to be "critically aware" about literature, surely they need to know how to recognize significant omissions, to see what a text is *not* about as well as what it *is* about, and to see how that is part of its meaning too.

As an obvious example, if you ask a class what *isn't* in Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, one answer that comes pretty quickly is "girls." In a lot of fiction for early adolescents, the answer is "parents." What are those omissions all about? What would happen if there were girls on Golding's island, and what is the effect of keeping them out? How would certain types of teen fiction be changed if the parents weren't so often dead or out of town "on assignment"?

To be more subtle, what is missing in *To Kill a Mockingbird?* One answer, I think, is a black point-of-view, since Tom Robinson seems little more than a noble primitive who gets scared and runs. Also, even though Atticus makes a point of saying that we should try to stand in someone else's shoes, the author doesn't invite us to try very hard to step into the shoes of the poor white Bob Ewell: Ewell is a monster who comes out on Hallowe'en, like a mad dog who can only be destroyed.

You may counter, "Well, what do you expect? The story is being told through the memories of a southern white girl whose father is a lawyer; of course she doesn't know anything about the depths of a Tom Robinson or Bob Ewell." Exactly. That is the limitation built into this story: it's about middle-class white kids growing up in the south, not about being

black, nor about being an angry and abusive poor white man. All texts have limitations of some kind or other. It's not a "fault" in this novel (although it might be a fault of teachers if they imagine that this book is sufficient in itself as a portrayal of race relations or southern life). We must not invite this analysis as something carping or negative. It isn't a case of nit-picking—"Oh dear, we caught the author with her bias showing!"—but a matter of recognizing the constructedness of all texts. There is no secular scripture—no book that is all ye need to know on earth. Every text is partial, and that is a *necessary condition of textuality* which our students must see with open eyes if they are going to develop skills of critical reading.

For me, the most useful and enjoyable way of engaging students in this kind of reading is to assign dramatic or written role-playing to explore characters and situations that have been muted in the original text. In *Great Expectations*, Dickens makes his narrator Pip marvelously articulate and "pure" of dialect, even, apparently, in his conversations as a child. In contrast, many of the other characters say little or speak in predictable formulas and comic dialects. I invite students to give the gift of eloquence to one of these other characters. They might write, for example, with the voice of Pip's sister, who, in Pip's memory, seems to be an ogre from a fairy tale, or as the hired hand Orlick, who haunts the fringes of the novel like a goblin in a nightmare, or as Wopsle, the parish clerk who turns ham actor and seems fit for nothing except to be the butt of narrative ridicule.

Adding interchapters or acting out scenes that might have occurred off-stage is not a new technique, but, as Bill Corcoran (1994) points out, imaginative re-creations that center on only the main characters don't necessarily push readers beyond making inferences authorized by the text; it is not until students attempt "more disruptive kinds of re-writings" from the points-of-view of minor or marginalized characters that they begin "to see whose meanings or significances are suppressed and whose are valorized or privileged" (19).

A powerful ideal, deeply held by English teachers, is that our job is to help students get "into" literature, to make them devoted lovers of books. There's no point in suggesting that we should abandon such an ideal. We should, however, recognize that this pledge does make us sound like priests inducting acolytes into a religion, and we should be wary of the easy slide into seeing literature as a magic rite or mystery demanding blind faith from the followers. Although plenty of the suggestions in this chapter help readers get *into* literature, at least as many strengthen

reading practices that, in a sense, get readers *out of* literature, standing back far enough to see how the whole process works, on the assumption that there is power to be gained from seeing how the "magic" is accomplished.

When Bertholt Brecht (1964) looked into the playhouses of his day, he saw audiences absorbed in theater, but he refused to accept that as a healthy condition: "They look at the stage as if in a trance: an expression which comes from the Middle Ages, the days of witches and priests" (187). Brecht recognized the pleasure in abandoning oneself to a work of art, but argued that there are other, more complex pleasures that come only with critical distance—pleasures "more intricate, richer in communication, more contradictory and more productive of results" (181). Thus began his project of creating a theater that drew attention to its own practices and artifices, a theater that he hoped would wake the spellbound watchers.

It is that kind of awareness that we need to complement—not supplant—our project of making students lovers of literature. Andrew Stibbs (1993) has said that while we often talk about being "immersed" in reading, in fact "competent readers are amphibious: they can enjoy both the air and the water; they know the difference" (58). Language tricks us into thinking that being "immersed" and "distant," or "inside" and "outside," are incompatible states, but it might be that both stances are complementary aspects of a healthy range of readerly work.

In any case, if the processes described here have been the invisible practices of reading, the secret and mysterious workings of the cult, it is time to make explicit to ourselves and to our classes how these things happen. The student who comes to us and says, "I just don't get it—I can never make sense of poetry," does not need to hear yet another brilliant analysis of a poem. That student wants to know *how* it is done, from the beginning, step by step. We have to demystify response to literature, helping learners to *see* reading and to see clearly themselves as readers.

5 The Unfolding Drama

Human interaction seems to be what we're trying to learn about, through the study of signs. That means attending to the way thoughts, feelings, moods, attitudes, stances, dispositions and so on arise; in reaction and in response. . . . That's why drama and media should be brought into the center of our teaching, not left to the edges.

John Dixon, "Categories to Frame an English Curriculum?" (1994)

Movement gets at what you cannot state verbally. . . . Movement gives you more than one image at a time; it is not linear. Like photography or graphic art, movement brings you juxtapositions and relationships that explode into new revelations.

Betty Jane Wagner, *Dorothy Heathcote: Drama as a Learning Medium* (1979)

For the last hour, you've overheard the neighboring English classroom: desks being moved, excited babble, and (was it really?) strange animal shrieks. When you finally peek through the window, you see clusters of contorted bodies, menacingly advancing on each other, or perhaps performing a slow motion abstract dance.

"Ah, yes," you think. "I've heard about my colleague's experiments with drama. This must be what she calls 'kinesthetic' learning. I wonder if her students really do find new insights into literature."

Maybe. Maybe not.

Drama can bring to the English classroom dynamic opportunities for important learning. Depressingly, it can also be nothing more than the latest gimmick, something to fill time on a Friday afternoon, or a way for teachers to look innovative in the eyes of supervisors. Dramatic work is fun for most (though not all) students, and of course it's rewarding to see learners working hard together, talking, planning, and taking responsibility. These are good things to happen in any classroom, but a few doubts might trouble the thoughtful teacher. She might suspect that some student presentations seem a bit too shallowly calculated for shock value and quick laughs. She might notice groups so excited by their own upcoming performances that they can't settle and attend to the work of other students. She might wonder whether some students spend disproportionate time planning technical details like props and costumes. Furthermore, while everyone may have enjoyed the project, is the class's understanding of literature or language deepened enough to justify the

time that has been spent? We want students to discover *new* things about people, texts, and situations, but is it not true that many classroom dramatizations enact only what students already knew?

We need to clarify exactly why we use drama in English. For many of us, I suspect it has been a frill, a little extra that "adds spice" to the real meat of the subject. I hear rationales like these: "They've been working hard on serious stuff for the last few weeks, so I thought it would be good to let them have some fun." "They enjoy it, so why not?" "I didn't want to start the next unit until Monday, so we had a few periods to kill." "You should see how hard they work!" Those comments reveal the assumption that drama is peripheral—a motivational tool that could be dropped if necessary. Even the observation that students "work hard" and "really enjoy" drama worries me, if it suggests, as I think it often does, that that's a sufficient justification for this work. School has to be about more than keeping teenagers cheerfully busy.

Drama has a central, not peripheral, role in the kind of English program that takes shape throughout this book. When *meaningful* drama is not one of the essential limbs of the body of English, that body is disabled, but meaningful drama happens only when its function is clearly understood, both in terms of the general program and in terms of each specific lesson.

General Functions

One function of drama (at least, the kind of drama I will be describing) is its compelling invitation to widen our focus beyond the individual, to include interactions with others and with contexts. I have said that that kind of awareness ought to be an aim of our teaching in any case, but when there are actual bodies standing before us in visible relationships to each other, this contextual consciousness becomes concrete reality. The lone student huddled over a copy of *Macbeth* may be able to analyze Macbeth's character as if it were a decontextualized atom, but that narrowness is challenged when the student role-plays with fellow students. Once the learner is on his or her feet, improvising in role as Macbeth, feeling the murderous breath of Lady Macbeth on her husband's neck, aware of his friend Banquo's thoughtful gaze at one side, hearing echoes of the witches' words, trying to look King Duncan in the eye, searching for something to say to this respected monarch—all these roles played by classmates—*then* the student is learning something about the push and pull of human interaction. *Then* we can talk about decisions made by Macbeth the individual, once we have made palpable the dreadful tangle of relationships in which he is enmeshed.

Dramatic work stretches us not only beyond a fixation on individual *characters* in literature, but also beyond individual *readers* of literature. John Dixon (1994) argues that dramatic work ought to be at the center of reading in school because it is an activity that readers do *together*: "it indicates that readings are a matter for social exploration by a group of students, not isolated individuals" (5).

A second purpose of drama is to push us beyond words to the nonverbal signs that comprise the bulk of everyday communication. Verbal language is the natural home ground of the English classroom, but words don't exist in a vacuum. Words are accompanied by and work with images, sounds, and sometimes even smells, tastes, and textures. Living as we do in a media-conscious age, the significance of the way things look and sound is recognized by everyone from the advertiser to the book designer to the student who carefully chooses the best computer typeface for a report. If teachers ignore this complexity and act as if words did in fact exist in a vacuum, then our version of language study will shrivel into irrelevance. Even the most text-bound experience of reading a novel calls up *imagined* sights and sounds; for me, a basic principle of reading instruction is that it is worthwhile to work with the dramatic embodiment of what readers see and hear in printed texts.

A third general function stems from the fact that dramatic work unfolds in time: it is about *living through* experience. Thus, drama can be the perfect antidote for the fragmentation of understanding that traditional academic work often seems to impose. While the thesis-oriented essay pushes us to find "points" that can be bundled into neat categories, drama invites us to explore what life feels like, moment-by-moment, in all its fluidity. When we turn the last page on a story and begin looking for its "themes," the crises and decisions of the text are already *faits accomplis*. By dramatically reconstructing the flow of experience, we face again those moments of choice and we can open up radical "what if?" possibilities, weighing the consequences of a change in just one factor. For example, what if Banquo's misgivings had been strong enough to make him confront Macbeth before the assassination? We could sit around after the reading and speculate abstractly, but the question is put to a different kind of test when we invite students to *take us through the experience*, improvising the imaginary encounter. After several sets of students have tried out the idea, there will be a stronger sense of how such a confrontation might have worked, and, possibly, new thoughts about the Banquo that Shakespeare actually does give us.

These are important goals that drama could help English achieve: expanding our focus from individuals to their interactions and contexts,

grounding our study of the word in recognition of the images and sounds that are bound to words, and reconstructing the flow of experience. This, at least, is the theory, but we all know that classroom implementation of good theory faces many hazards.

Specific Uses

One problem is that much classroom drama takes the form of the "skit." "Skits" are, by definition, quick and entertaining. No one ought to expect skits to be profound vehicles of discovery; lightness, even glibness, is built into the convention. Even if we assign skits on tragic themes—say, the death of a character—we are working against the grain of the convention, and any truly deepening work that results is a credit to the tone the teacher has set or to the commitment of the students. It is not a credit to anything inherent in the dramatic convention we have chosen. When students work in a primarily presentational mode, there is a risk that most of their effort will go into figuring out how to entertain (impress, amuse) the audience; there may be little time left for thoughtful, reflective probing.

We need a repertoire of dramatic conventions that go beyond skits—conventions that reduce the pressure to entertain and multiply opportunities for growth. These conventions do exist, and there are recipe books of dramatic forms available. (I recommend Jonothan Neelands' *Structuring Drama Work* [1990].) However, a book full of recipes does not in itself make a healthy meal. The deeper need is not merely for a list of conventions, but for a clearer, more systematic sense of appropriate moments and specific uses for drama in the English classroom. In other words, the question is not just, "*What* is there to do other than skits?" but rather, "*When* are the moments that beg for drama, and *why* are we using drama at those moments?" Only when we move towards this kind of thinking about *purposes* do we move beyond skits. At that point, we no longer say to ourselves, "Let's do some drama because it makes a nice change"; we say instead, "We need drama here because at this point our work demands it."

What follows is a tentative set of questions about literature that lead us to purposeful "when" and "why" decisions about the use of drama. In each case, I suggest appropriate strategies—strategies other than the familiar skit. In many cases, live, on-the-spot improvisation replaces the rehearsed presentation, thus emphasizing lived-through experience of participants, rather than performance for the entertainment of spectators. Also, in many activities, physical movement plays a central role, explicitly calling upon what has been called "kinesthetic intelligence"

(Gardner 1985). "Role-playing" is sometimes interpreted as people sitting around a table and talking, and some of the following activities can look like that. However, if we're trying to see how verbal language is embedded in nonverbal contexts, then we need to make a deliberate effort to experiment with other ways of knowing and communicating—visceral, physical, large-as-life complements to the "talk and text" of traditional English.

Does a Character in the Text Behave in an Extreme or Puzzling Way?

To probe the character's behavior, have students brainstorm the questions—not the answers, just the questions—they would ask this character if they had the chance. Then invite a volunteer to sit on a "hot seat," assume the role of the character, and improvise answers to the class's questions. The success of this strategy depends on clear ground rules: everyone must feel free to call for "time-outs." The interviewers may need time-outs to debate the likelihood of the volunteer's answers. They may, if they wish, offer to replace the volunteer and try their own version of the character. The volunteer may need time-out to ask for the class's help on a difficult question, or, if he or she is uncomfortable, to ask to be replaced. Once the session is up and running, the pressure of spontaneity often leads to sudden, eloquent insight, especially, sometimes, from supposedly weaker students. The question, "What could you possibly find attractive in that Duke?" (from *Twelfth Night*) inspired one volunteer "Viola" to a beautiful extempore ode on the mystery of love.

An alternative method that allows for more preparation is role-playing a meeting in a counselor or social worker's office. Announce that various people who know the character have been invited to the meeting (parents, teachers, neighbors, and so on). Students in groups are assigned one person from the character's life and told to prepare what they want that person to say in the meeting. When the role-playing starts, the teacher in role as counselor or social worker hosts the discussion and encourages interaction between the character groups. ("What can you, Jack's mother [from *Lord of the Flies*], tell us that will help us to understand this boy?")

Does a Character Face a Moment of Crisis or a Critical Decision?

The need here is to find a way to evoke that moment of decision—to make it come alive for students, so that they *feel* what it is like to be the charac-

ter at that juncture. When a character's decision is subject to pressure by others, classes can explore that pressure by role-playing confrontations. Gang members from *West Side Story* sit down with Tony and try to talk him out of his infatuation with Maria; in another corner of the room, Maria is challenged by friends in her gang. (This *could* be done as a prepared skit, but when the conversation is improvised on the spot, there is an extra charge of reality: what does it feel like to hear your friends accuse you of betraying them?)

One of my favorite conventions is "the dream." *The Divine Comedy*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and Dickens' *Christmas Carol* are well-known examples of the literary "dream vision," and many works include references to the disturbed, fitful sleep of characters in stress. Macbeth, for example, is "afflicted" by "terrible dreams." When Dickens' Pip learns of his "great expectations," he never again sleeps the "old sound sleep," and the boys in *Lord of the Flies* are tormented by nightmares. These moments are invitations for students to enact the dreams that the characters must be suffering. Dreams are especially useful because they don't have to follow logical or narrative sequence. In fact, I actively discourage groups from constructing straightforward narrative dreams. Fragmented and recursive "dream-logic" allows them to tap into more profound insights and symbols.

I ask students first to pore over the text, finding snippets of language that might echo in the character's ears. They then take that language and weave it into group movements that create the character's dream world. These dreamscapes are rehearsed and presented, group-by-group, in uninterrupted flow—one continuous night of dreams, suffered by me, the teacher in role as dreamer, sitting or lying in the middle of the classroom. I like to play the dreamer, partly because students take mildly malicious glee in inflicting a nightmare on their teacher, but also because a really effective nightmare ought to be a bit scary. I don't mind students watching that, but it would be irresponsible to make them the victims at the center of the trauma.

Is There a Gap—of Age, Social Class, Historical Period, or Situation—between Students and the Text?

Sometimes we need to spend a little extra time building bridges between the lives of our students and the lives in the literature we expect them to appreciate. Role-playing can help them begin to imagine another kind of life *before* approaching the story. Before reading a novel like Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel*, with its geriatric protagonist, a class might role-play life in a nursing home with the teacher as a patronizing, restric-

tive administrator. Before working with David French's *Leaving Home*, my upper-middle class students use role-playing to help them feel their way around the unfamiliar relationship between a laborer with a Grade Three education and his university-bound son. I give them a few snippets of character information from the beginning of the play and we watch as students improvise the supper table scene that might occur. This prefatory role-playing shouldn't be expected to produce deep insights; all it need do is begin the process of alerting readers to the kinds of issues that might arise.

A useful kinesthetic strategy is simply to ask students, all together, to try walking the way they think a particular character might walk. There will be discussion about the walks later, but silence during the moments of movement—or silence broken only by the teacher's narration—helps students concentrate on their own bodies and discover their reactions to the movements of others around them.

For example, before reading *Lord of the Flies*, I tell students, "You are schoolboys and have just survived a plane crash. You find yourselves on a jungle island and naturally begin to explore your new environment. Start exploring, thinking about what has happened, where you are and how you feel. Don't say anything, but let your walk show your feelings." As they move around the classroom, some may choose to curl up in frightened fetal balls, some may nervously try to make silent friends with their fellows, and others may assume a jaunty bravado. All the varied responses become grist for the discussion mill afterwards. (Why did they move those ways? How did they react to others? Did they find themselves wanting to do things that they felt they couldn't?) With skillful management of discussion, this all becomes relevant to the experience of the novel.

Of course, this isn't restricted to a prereading activity: students already into the reading of a novel, *Huckleberry Finn*, for example, can try walking or sitting like Huck. How do the respectable townsfolk walk? How do their walks change when they see Huck?

Is There an Issue of Blame or Responsibility in the Text?

Texts that invite readers to reflect on questions of responsibility lend themselves to scenes of investigations: inquests, police inquiries, counselor's offices. The structured nature of these situations suits them well to classroom role-playing, because ground rules can be laid down so that, in a general way, students know what they're supposed to do. The teacher can take the role of moderator or chairperson who keeps order, manages questions, and allows students to present information prepared

in groups. (I used to include talk shows in this list, but the growth of sensationalism in TV talk shows has made them a questionable model: I don't want to give students practice in name-calling and jeering.)

Is a Work or Character Especially Complex?

When there is a lot to deal with in a text, it helps to get hold of a few moments that focus or crystallize important issues. Groups can choose two or three significant scenes in the text and create tableaux of those moments. Strictly speaking, a tableau is a frozen picture made with bodies, but you may decide to require or allow a few words or a little movement. When a character undergoes a change throughout a story, it can be effective to show a tableau of the initial state and one or two subsequent tableaux representing the changed condition, with slow motion transformations between images. The transformations may reveal a great deal about the nature of change in the story. Try this, for example, with *Great Expectations*, which Dickens has already conveniently divided into three "stages." Of course, all this should then be explored through discussion.

Is the Ending of a Story Tantalizingly Open?

English teachers are familiar with extensions of stories beyond their original conclusions. ("Imagine that the characters meet five years later. . . .") Combining this with role-playing can be an exciting way of enacting the consequences of a character's decisions.

When my senior class finished reading Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, they raised the obvious question: whatever is going to happen to that nineteenth-century woman, walking out on her husband and children? I asked them to imagine that a month has passed after the separation at the end of the play, and that Nora remembers an object she has left behind but now wants to retrieve from her husband's home. Two volunteers improvised Nora and Torvald while the rest of the class watched intently. We called "time-outs" frequently to discuss and replay exactly how Nora would approach that door, what Torvald would be doing, who would speak the first words, what those words would be, and how each character would react. (This "time-out" for discussion slows the drama down for reflection, guarantees that the whole class feels ownership of the drama, and protects volunteers from the burden of having to create roles all by themselves. In a way, the volunteers have easy jobs: they just have to do what we tell them.)

Our "Torvald" realized that "Nora" (played with absolute credibility by one of the school's football stars) was going to walk out that door again. Desperate to keep her, the student role-player came up with the inspiration of offering Nora the portrait of her mother for which she had returned, "but only if you go into the children's room and explain to them why you left." The stakes in the drama rose sharply, as we all suddenly realized that a face-to-face meeting between Nora and the children would galvanize a troubling and unresolved issue in Ibsen's play. We quickly conscripted from the class four volunteer "children" and sent "Nora" in to talk to them. Three of the "children" were straightforwardly happy to see their mother, but one student decided to play an older child, resentfully aware of what her mother had done. This oldest child challenged Nora: "Why did you go? Are you going to leave us again?" There was a breathless moment as our volunteer "Nora" struggled to find an answer. And then . . .

And then the school bell rang, startling us all out of our absorption in the drama.

This whole lesson could have been handled differently. The class could have planned and rehearsed skits showing what would happen if Nora met Torvald again. I'm sure there would have been entertaining presentations, but I'm equally sure that we would never have tapped into the excitement of shared creation or the risk of exploring relationships on the spot, without rehearsal. We weren't just sitting back and watching someone's skit; we were making drama together. We were watching meanings unfold— meanings of our own making, spun from the text.

Do We Want to Explore Interaction between Characters?

This next set of activities concentrates especially on the use of movement. I call the first suggestion "the chorus," recalling that members of the chorus in Greek drama were both singers and dancers, which is why the words "choral" and "choreography" share a common root. I have students prepare choral readings that use both sound and simple movement to explore relationships.

Groups of students search a text, looking for lines of dialogue that epitomize the relationship between two key characters, and rehearse those collected lines as choral readings with carefully thought-out, expressive movements. These movements need not be a sophisticated "dance": much can be communicated by just a few gestures—a raised hand, a step forward, a turning away—but the gestures do need to be large and stylized. Students do need specific instructions to alert them

to the possibilities in vocal work. They need to think about volume, pacing, pitch, identifying key words, and how to make words sound like their meanings. Be sure to head off any anti-collaborative tendencies: some groups may try to avoid the problem-solving task by simply assigning individual lines ("you say the first line, I'll say the second"). Insist that groups accept the challenge of using multiple voices at the same time.

To take again the example of *Lord of the Flies*, groups of students search and copy down lines said by Jack or Ralph (one character assigned per group)—lines that highlight the tension emerging between the two boys. When they string these quotations together, the groups have, in effect, created monologues to be delivered chorally, with movements, face-to-face against an "opposing" group—a "Jack" group and a "Ralph" group presenting their monologues to each other in sequence. ("Jack" groups often invade the "space" of the "Ralph" group, encircling or penetrating the other group, a kinesthetic embodiment of Jack's aggressive drive.) For subsequent discussion and writing, I ask students, "What was it like to 'be' that character saying those things and taking those positions? What was it like to be confronted by the group delivering the words and actions of the opposing character?"

After preparation through discussion and group work like the previous activity, students might be ready to tackle a more individual task. I ask them to shape themselves into "statues" that represent the essence of a particular character. As they experiment with positions, it is important to draw explicit attention to a range of factors: "Is your character a sitting or standing kind of person? Do you want to freeze him or her in a typical action? What is the angle of your head (that is, your character's head)? Your neck? What is the feeling in your shoulders? What are your arms doing? Where are you placing most of your weight? Is any part of your body likely to be feeling tight or twisted?"

I then ask each student to devise a simple repetitive movement for the statue—a gesture that further represents character. Once they have established this, I invite half the class to "step out of" their statues and walk around, examining and commenting on the animated statues created by their classmates.

The next step is to pair up students, "Jacks" partnered with "Ralphs." Each "Jack" and each "Ralph" carefully studies the position and repetitive movement of the partner. Both students then take their statue positions, facing the partner from a distance of several feet. On my signal, they begin a slow motion walk across the floor towards each other, during which each transforms himself and ends in the opposite pose. In other words, the "Jacks" turn into "Ralphs" and vice versa. As always, the ensuing discus-

sion is important: "How did it feel to transform yourself from a Ralph into a Jack? What does that tell you about these characters and their relationship?"

One final activity is relatively sophisticated, demanding considerable thoughtfulness from students. It probably requires, at least at first, the focused supervision by the teacher, which means you must request volunteers to carry out the task while everyone else watches. Once "statues" for conflicting characters have been developed (as in the previous step), the teacher points out that these two characters have difficulty coexisting in the same world; they do not fit comfortably within the same picture. In real life, we try to adjust our world-pictures to our satisfaction, but that attempt is complicated by the fact that other people have their own ideas about how to adjust the world, and their agendas do not necessarily fit ours.

Two volunteers—one "Jack" and one "Ralph"—assume their statue positions, together forming one "picture." At a signal, both statues come alive and in *simultaneous, silent, slow motion* begin to do whatever the volunteers deem necessary to make the "picture" ideally acceptable to their respective characters. For example, Ralph might decide he wants to reach out a hand of friendship to Jack. Jack, however, might decide that he needs to assert power over Ralph. Both participants have to recalculate their strategies moment by moment as they recognize what the other role-player is doing. It is essential that this game be conducted in slow motion, which allows participants time to see and respond to what the other character is doing, as well as allowing spectators time to analyze what is happening. I enforce a slow pace by having a time-keeper clap hands slowly while the "actors" make only one small move per beat. After the class has had a chance to discuss what happened, new volunteers can be invited to replace one or both role-players, exploring other believable courses of action for dealing with this relationship, perhaps eventually adding words. At its best, this technique can lead to fascinating examinations of relationships in stylized miniature, raising critical questions about what these characters could or should do differently.

Both this activity and the previous were inspired by Augusto Boal's *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* (1992), which contains many more suggestions that can be profitably incorporated into literature classes.

The kind of work described in this chapter requires risk-taking by the teacher. There's a lot that can go wrong. Incautious enthusiasm too often leads to fumbled lessons, leaving the teacher disillusioned and ready to retreat to the safety of familiar routine. Teachers inexperienced in

drama do well to try just a few little activities at first, and to seek out colleagues who may be interested in doing the same. They also do well to consider the following warnings. In listing these perils, I don't mean to discourage anyone's experiments; instead, I hope to head off well-intentioned pratfalls.

Dramatic Activities Can Distract Us from Our Primary Goals

Even as we acknowledge verbal language's embeddedness in nonverbal contexts, we need to remember that words still play a central role in our subject. We are obliged to keep one foot securely on that foundation. We may use movement activities to pursue objectives in English, but we are not trying to turn English classrooms into dance studios, any more than the use of art or music turns us into art or music teachers.

In other words, we must ask ourselves whether time spent on untraditional activities is worthwhile when measured against whatever language growth is occurring. I fear this principle has been forgotten when I see students spending *excessive* time on the nuts and bolts of any kind of "extension" work: building unnecessarily detailed props for dramatization, constructing a fussily precise model of Shakespeare's stage, spending hours drawing and coloring media storyboards, or laboring to polish the steps of an intricate movement piece. When students work together on these projects, they indeed use talk to plan and negotiate, and this is valuable, but there is a point of diminishing returns, a level of exertion beyond which there is little language growth to be gained.

My favorite drama activities are ones that engage students immediately and produce results quickly.

Having Fun Doesn't Guarantee Meaningful Learning

For many students, the activities I have described are "fun." You will see their excitement. And who could quarrel with that?

However, if they are deskbound most of the day, it's not surprising that teenagers are pleased to push back their desks and stretch their limbs. This is a cheap thrill with no *necessary* connection to real learning. Both teacher and students must understand that these activities aren't just an amusing diversion for Friday afternoon. ("And now for something completely different . . .) Dramatic work must be seen as serious meaning-making, as earnest as any essay-writing or reflective discussion. Because the fun is so obvious, the teacher may have to work especially hard to deepen the reflection. I like to tell students *before* they start an activity that they will have to write or speak about what is going to happen; this

helps put them into a "meaning-making mode." Sometimes I address the issue of fun explicitly, saying to students, "I hope you have fun making Macbeth's nightmare come alive, but let's not confuse 'having fun' with 'being funny.' There's nothing funny about what's going on inside Macbeth, and if you make us laugh, you've done something wrong."

The teacher must constantly challenge shallowness. If students are asked to try walking around the room with the gait and posture of the elderly, it is all too easy for them to do a perfunctory caricature of old age, one hand on bent back, other hand unsteadily propped on a cane. At that point, the teacher must stop the action and ask, "What do you all seem to be doing? Where did that image come from? Are there other ways of being old?" Drama, like anything else in the English program, doesn't have to be shallow, but it will be if the instructor is satisfied with mere fun. Cecily O'Neill and Alan Lambert (1982) warn: "Left to themselves, pupils are likely to work only at a superficial level in which they repeat or re-enact their existing insights" (22). This is not a complaint about students, but rather a call for responsible teacher intervention.

Risk and Discomfort Factors Must Be Carefully Calculated

The great British drama educator, Dorothy Heathcote, once said to a student teacher, "Stop promising them the drama will be fun. It may not be for them" (Wagner 1979, 220). Despite what I said in the previous section about "fun," we must recognize that some students become anxious at the mere request that they stand up and move in what has normally been for them a "books and desks" setting. The results of this anxiety are predictable, ranging from withdrawal or passive compliance to self-conscious attention-seeking. It is in everyone's interests for the teacher to address this problem.

Individual self-consciousness relaxes when students work as part of a larger group, and I find it helps to name their fear: "You might be afraid you're going to look silly, but everyone else is thinking the same thing, and we're all doing it together anyway." This is when it is especially useful to have announced a focusing question—"Be prepared to write about what such a character must feel, walking around like that all day"—so that they have more to think about than how they look to others.

I emphasize the understanding that comes through the *process* of these activities; I downplay the role of presenting polished *products* before the class. This lessens "performance anxiety" and reduces the number of stagy gags designed only to entertain an audience. When it does seem appropriate to let the class see what everyone else has been working on, I try to create one large, seamless performance in which we move

from group to group or individual to individual in a preplanned sequence with no interruptions. When students are all part of one big performance, there is an orientation towards the shared task, rather than the exposure of being a lonely performer before a critical audience.

Dramatic Work Withers if Left Out on a Limb by Itself

It is tempting to paste new teaching strategies onto our existing programs. ("Yesterday, we took time out to try some drama; today we're going back to the real stuff.") This attitude communicates that the new activity is not really integral. It also misses the point that students are *whole* people. Gardner's (1985) "seven intelligences" (or "four learning styles," or "mind and body," or whatever other ways we have of carving up human experience) work best when understood as integrated facets of a learning organism.

Lesson planning should reinforce this reality by pushing students to make constant *translations* of their understanding from one mode to another. For example, we might read, then talk about our reading, then explore those ideas in drama, then write about those new understandings, then read some more in that new light. In this way we work continuously at structuring and restructuring understanding, seeing things in new ways as we translate between media.

Young children learn through interactions with others, using all their senses, often while playing roles. By secondary school, we rightly expect learners to be beyond the playground, but all those factors can still be vital forms of learning for adolescents, whether schools recognize it or not.

Even adults like us who have made our way through the verbal-linguistic hoops of post-secondary education and have become English teachers—even *we* still have kinesthetic intelligence. In professional workshops, after choral confrontations between Jack and Ralph, teachers often say with surprise, "I could really *feel* what it would be like to be there, up against that person." These are experienced professionals, who have taught *Lord of the Flies* many times. "Intellectually" (verbally, linguistically) they "know" all about that novel before coming to the workshop, but once they begin to *move* through the experience, there are new responses for them to discover.

The activities sketched here are only the beginning. Alfred North Whitehead (1967) warned that "in teaching you will come to grief as soon as you forget that your pupils have bodies" (50). What doors of understanding may we be opening for young people, once we allow them to bring their bodies into the classroom?

6 Culture Makers

Our teaching of literature might have a deeper effect if we didn't continually tell students that imaginative writing is less important and less mature than expository writing.

Peter Elbow, *What is English?* (1990)

To the extent that the materials of education are chosen for their amenableness to imaginative transformation and are presented in a light to invite negotiation and speculation, to that extent education becomes a part of . . . "culture making."

Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (1986)

In the last two chapters, I've tried to offer lots of practical suggestions—things that I have done and that you might like to attempt as well. I have placed descriptions of those activities within larger conceptual frames (about reading and the role of classroom drama) because I'm convinced we need to rethink those frames, but you may well have preferred the more down-to-earth how-to details. If that's the case, I hope your understandable appetite for practical activities is satisfied for the moment, because in this short chapter I need to do a bit of thoughtful meandering, just before we head into the book's home stretch. Specifically, I want to mull over with you the nature of *productivity* in English, and what it means for students to be "makers"—makers of writings and makers of readings—not just consumers stuffed full of books.

Making Literature

Drama, other arts, and dedicated creative writing courses are among the few school programs where students are likely to feel, on a sustained basis, that they are producers and not just consumers of culture. Much writing in mainstream English classes is primarily for the purpose of studying works written by others, as in the typical response paper or essay, implying that the original piece of literature is the "real thing" and that the student writing has a parasitic relationship to the work of "real writers." There can be great excitement in articulating one's understanding of a literary work, but it is something else again to know that one has *made* literature, to recognize oneself as a maker and not just an interpreter. That this does not normally happen is evidenced by the number of seventeen-year-olds in writing courses who shyly confide, "You know, this is

the first poem I've written since Grade Eight." In American high school English programs, the text-based literary essay massively outweighs any other kind of writing and, tellingly, though not surprisingly, this bias increases in senior years (Applebee 1993, 162–67). This no doubt reveals assumptions about what "preparing for university" means, but, as Jack Thomson (1993) reminds us, art and music teachers regularly expect their students "to perform and create as well as to appreciate":

> Only in English have we traditionally set up a portrait-gallery model of the curriculum as opposed to a workshop model. We have expected our students to walk through the gallery of great writers and admire what they see, but not to touch the works or to create any of their own. (132)

This leads to a strange contradiction: on the one hand, we claim to treasure the imaginative works of classic authors; on the other hand, we treat imaginative writing by students as if it were only the play of childhood, to be left behind for harder, more important work. Marginalization of primary creation is implicit even in the way we use the label "creative writing": would anyone dare be so condescending as to call *Hamlet* or *Ulysses* "creative writing"? Whole courses on creative writing are invariably options—frills to be indulged in once you've mastered the real core of the subject.

In one writing class, my students and I were comparing the way we easily call ourselves "readers," but are inhibited about proclaiming ourselves "writers." We think "writer" is a privileged title reserved for professionals. This discussion reminded one student of a trip back to his home village in a developing country. There, he recalled, all people, young or old, could contribute to social gatherings and celebrations by reciting their own poems. They respected their national authors, but that didn't stop everyone else from participating in the making of local culture. The memory was particularly important for this now westernized and academically successful young man who was struggling to accept that he too could be a poet.

Even if literature created by students is linked to specific works that have been studied in class, the link can be left open, allowing room for a play of possibilities that frees some student writers. They may find they are able to "talk back" to authors in ways generally not possible within the more polite and formal bounds of the academic essay or even in more informal response writing. For example, when I invited a senior class to create their own fictions by uncovering areas that Thomas Hardy had left unspoken in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, one student chose to write an account of Tess's trial and execution. (In Hardy's novel, these events are summa-

rized, not witnessed.) In its first draft, the boy's short story was the predictable attempt of a twentieth-century adolescent to imagine nineteenth-century justice, but one odd feature stood out. The student had chosen to write from the point-of-view of Farmer Groby, a minor character who, in the novel, briefly appears as a demanding employer of Tess's labor. The student invented a scene in which Groby witnesses Tess's end. The odd thing was the palpable edge of nasty satisfaction that could be heard in Groby's account of the execution. After we chatted about this, the student decided to use subsequent drafts to explore this hostility. Through revisions, it emerged that in this student's version of Groby we were seeing an illiterate farmer's vicious resentment of the peasant girl who has had enough education to become literate and make contacts above her social class. In short, Tess makes Groby feel stupid, and he is glad to see her die.

Most interesting, however, was what the student eventually recognized about his own projection into the story: "That's just how the book made *me* feel—stupid." He was struggling with the reading and writing demands of senior high school, desperately aware that he was unlikely to be accepted by any university, and this hefty Victorian novel seemed the final nail in his academic coffin. By working in a fictional mode, he was able to concretize what this oppressive book meant to him at a crucial juncture in his life, and discover how the reading and writing of texts may allow us to displace or project our feelings.

Could he have learned this by writing an essay on *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*? I doubt it. For one thing, the tools of fiction allowed the student to benefit from playfulness: he used the resources supplied by the novel to play at being someone else (Farmer Groby) who was also partly himself. At the end of Chapter 2, I cited Csikszentmihalyi's double process of "integration" and "differentiation" (1990, 41). This student had integrated himself with the world of the novel—producing a credible "missing chapter"—but he had also differentiated himself by clarifying his own stance vis-à-vis the novel and the issues of literacy raised by its reading.

In this case, the creative form allowed specifically for the play of *feelings* in ways not necessarily available in the more rationalistic, analytic essay form. David Buckingham, Pete Fraser, and Netia Mayman (1990) address this issue when considering the difference between analysis and production in media classes.

> Analysis seeks to intellectualize, and thereby to regulate pleasure. . . . Practical work, by contrast, allows much more room for *play* with "media language," with the symbolic resources which are to

> hand: it can engage much more easily with pleasure and fantasy, with the sensuous, non-rational aspects of the process. (54)

Along with "pleasure and fantasy," we might add "anxiety and nightmare." Those "sensuous, non-rational aspects" are, after all, vital in stories, poems, and plays, as well as in the products of mass media. If students are to understand how these forms work, they need the experience of making them work.

One final benefit derives from what might be called the act of "translation." When my understanding of a text or an issue is in one form—let's say, jottings in a response journal—that form influences and limits the kinds of insight available to me. My understanding must fit the shape of the medium. If I then translate my response into another genre or medium—a poem, video, essay, story, painting, dance, or whatever—working in the new medium forces me to *reconstruct* what I thought I already knew. This is powerful learning: surely students should be fashioning these kinds of translations as much as possible. The constant restructuring of understanding not only brings new learning about the topic at hand, but also focuses attention on the workings of translation and genre, and shines a spotlight on the learner as a producer of meanings.

Making Readings

In the previous section, I argue that what we call creative writing ought to be an essential, not supplementary, part of our program. Now I want to shift ground a little. In view of our current understanding that meanings are actively *made*, not just passively received, the reading of others' writings has a productive component, even if we don't use that reading as a prompt for our own poems or stories. Yes, students ought to create more literature of their own, but the complementary and more subtle challenge is for us to help them feel productive even when they are working with someone else's published writing. In fact, isolating creative writing into its own little ghetto may prevent us from recognizing the creative demands of *all* committed reading and writing.

Every "reading" is also a "writing." Yes, I know, that probably sounds like mere postmodern wordplay, but I think it can be a useful principle. When you read a story, your understanding takes the form of a new "text" that you produce, either orally as comments offered in discussion, or in writing of various kinds. The act of writing (or speaking) doesn't just reproduce an understanding that already existed (wordlessly?) somewhere else. Articulation creates meaning "at the point of utterance," to use James Britton's phrase (1980).

Richard Hopkins, in *Narrative Schooling* (1994), helps clarify this idea by comparing meaning-making to narrative-building. The act of creating a narrative pulls separate events and characters together into a plot that makes sense, that has meaningful themes. Hopkins suggests this as a model for what we want students to do.

> Narrative is not just the reporting of knowledge gained and assimilated; it is the creation of knowledge through assignment of meaning. As human beings tell their stories they assign meaning to those events that have already happened in the past and those that they wish to happen in the future; they ground the present and shape the future. (132)

The thought of "shaping the future" points to the profound social importance of this work. Students who see themselves as *assigners of meaning* rather than *reporters of knowledge* are more likely to recognize themselves as responsible agents in the ongoing task of making sense of life and building society. In *Writing the Future*, Gunther Kress (1995) argues that the traditional humanistic goal of developing "critical insight," while essential, is not sufficient: we also need citizens who can use insight to go on to "*making and shaping*" the future—"*the envisaging, design, and making of alternatives*" (3, emphasis in original). It is a question of what stance we encourage students to take with respect to the culture around them. Is the primary stance that of the commentator and note-maker in the portrait gallery, or that of the builder with a job to be done?

Can we use this thinking to sharpen our focus on the productive work of English? Rather than holding up literature as a fine specimen to be admired from afar, or gazed upon narcissistically as a mirror of our lives, we need to teach that we *do* things with texts. We take them into our lives and shape meaningful, purposeful constructions. With that as a cornerstone of English teaching, perhaps new productive energy can be brought to the study of texts, and we can watch students grow through the recognition and practice of their own textual power. What classroom conditions are necessary to bring about this orientation?

Clearing Space for Learners' Constructions

For as long as I have been either a student or teacher of English, I have heard teachers claim that they encourage independent, original thought. And for exactly as long, students and graduates have complained that, despite those claims, English teachers don't really respect divergent readings and only want to hear echoes of their own thoughts. I'm prepared to believe those teachers' declarations of intention—I have to, since I've

said those things myself—but how is it that that intention has been so miserably misunderstood and mistrusted? We may have failed to live up to our own promises. Observations on both sides of the Atlantic suggest that our rhetoric of "openness" and "student-centeredness" does not match the narrowly circumscribed range of possibilities we actually allow students (Applebee 1993; Freedman 1990). It is as if we invite learners to pick up their tools and build a structure but then fail to notice that we haven't stepped back to leave them any room to do so.

Furthermore, even when we *do* make room, students may not appreciate the opportunity. One researcher (Carroll 1994) watched a teacher's sincere efforts to engage students in constructing meanings and found no evidence of students appropriately accepting the challenge or assuming the role of active thinkers. A decade of schooling had perhaps accustomed students to lazier, more passive roles. We not only have to move over; we also have to make that space inviting enough to overcome human inertia.

Experience and Questions First; Theory and Answers Second

One way of clearing space is by being cautious about serving up theory first, before students have had a chance to see what they can make of experience. If we tell students, "Here's how short stories are structured," or "Here are five figures of speech," then send them on a mission to analyze stories in those terms or to find examples of metaphors, we effectively limit students to making their experience fit our structures. That is not the same as making sense of things themselves—encountering the text and seeing what grows out of that transaction. Harold Vine and Mark Faust (1995), studying the responses of many readers of various ages, noted that some readers had an immediate tendency, no doubt as a result of their schooling, to try to identify literary devices.

> And what were the results? *None of the readers who labeled figures of speech were able to interpret those elements, and almost all of the readers who interpreted successfully the [poem's] figures of speech did so without labeling them."* (1993, 95, emphasis in original)

The point is not that we should hide literary labels from students; we should let identification grow naturally out of the meaning-making processes of the reader, rather than beginning with lists of terms and drills in the hunting and labeling of metaphors (96).

Part of the space we have to allow is also the space to make questions. In the stereotype of classroom dialogue, a teacher asks questions

which students answer. One approach to that classroom is to study the level of cognitive challenge in the teacher's questions. However, as Susan Hynds has pointed out, we might ask ourselves whether the real issue is "*challenging* questions or challenging *questions*" (1992, 95). *Challenging* questions demand higher thinking skills, and that's all right as far as it goes, but to challenge *questions* implies doubts about the whole role of teacher questioning. As long as it is the teacher who enters the classroom "armed with an arsenal of questions" (Dias 1992, 135), the primary acts of inquiring and deciding what matters have already been done by the teacher: there's no room left for the student on that playing field. In particular, there is evidence that short answer worksheet style questions actually damage students' ability to make sense of texts, by fragmenting their understanding into little searches for isolated answers (Marshall 1987).

It would be closer to a meaning-making process if students were to identify their own initial hypotheses and difficulties, and encouraged to work *from there* to the issues that *they* think need to be explored. The most useful opening questions from a teacher might be, "What questions do you have?" or "What do you think needs to be talked about here?" Of course, developing questions and finding issues isn't an automatic skill: it is something for students to learn how to do. They need to spend time framing questions, hearing the questions of others, seeing where questions lead. It is matter for ongoing practice, not a one-day lesson. After a semester of this kind of focus, I have seen Grade Nine students do creditable jobs of handling an examination in which they were given a previously unseen short story, told to read it, make up three worthwhile questions, and then answer their own questions.

The intention of this kind of work is to downplay the role of teacher as holder of the Right Answer, thereby opening space for students to go about the practice of making meaning themselves. We had better realize, however, that this can turn into yet another game of "Guess What the Teacher Wants." Instead of "Guess What Answer the Teacher Wants," the game becomes "Guess What Question. . . ." Given the necessary power of the teacher as evaluator, it is not easy to avoid this trap. Patrick Dias has written thoughtfully about this, and insists that teachers must work extremely hard to avoid suggesting that there are "right" answers (or questions) lurking in their minds (1987, 74–75), and that this is more easily accomplished if the focus of evaluation shifts from final products (with answers to be judged) to the processes of meaning-making (1992, 60). The issue, after all, is not whether students "get" this poem, but whether they are growing in their ability to make sense of any poetry.

growing in their ability to do the readerly work described in Chapter 4.

Handing over responsibility for meaning making does raise the possibility of unexpected results. Teachers often express concern that discussions need to "go somewhere," and classroom observations indicate that it is usually the teachers keeping things "on track," making the bridges between student comments. The desire to make sure there is shape to classroom discussion often results in teachers, not students, constructing meanings (Marshall et al. 1995, 21, 55).Indeed, teachers *should* play strong classroom roles. Relinquishing the job of meaning-maker and answer-provider doesn't have to turn teachers into weaklings; it just redefines the focus of their efforts. Peter Elbow (1990) has observed the paradox that passing authority to make meaning over to students may require the teacher to assume more authority in the area of classroom management (41). The classroom work described by Patrick Dias (1987)certainly doesn't sound like an unplanned jam session. He provides a detailed sequence of instructions designed to maximize meaningful student involvement (14–15). (For example, in one stage students state in turn brief initial responses to a poem, *without* immediate feedback from anyone else, so that all voices can be heard before discussion settles on a few issues. Another step requires group reporters *not* to make notes during discussions, so that when they report back to the whole class they have to listen and build on the comments of previous groups.) Dias doesn't prejudge the meanings students will construct, but he most definitely controls the activities that go on in that classroom.

The position that meanings need to be made and that culture is in the process of being created by us implies uncertainty about things as they are. There's a lot more security for both teachers and students in believing that somewhere there's a teacher's handbook with the right answers. The trade-off for giving up that security is the excitement and fulfillment of assuming responsibility for creation, but that happens only when the uncertainty is accepted as a healthy state of affairs. Let us not underestimate the depth of this anxiety: if there is one lesson that school has most effectively taught, it is that there are right answers, that teachers have them, and that the smartest thing for a student to do is to get those answers as quickly as possible. We need to reverse this lesson and teach the appreciation of uncertainty, the "uses of chaos," as Ann Berthoff (1980) puts it.

> Now, chaos is scary: the meanings which can emerge from it, which can be discerned taking shape within it, can be discovered only if students who are learning to write can learn to tolerate ambiguity. (77)

Part of this tolerance may have to be learned from the very language of teachers. Interesting research has been conducted by Carol Feldman, who measured teachers' use of linguistic expressions of uncertainty (like *might* and *could*) both in the classroom and in the staff room. Feldman found that expressions of uncertainty or doubt were far more likely when teachers talked to other teachers than when they talked to students.

> The world that the teachers were presenting to their students was a far more settled, far less hypothetical, far less negotiatory world than the one they were offering to their colleagues. (reported in Bruner 1986, 126)

If we more consistently use language that expresses tentative and speculative approaches to whatever is being discussed, we open verbal space for the negotiation of meaning.

I've been talking about students first as "makers of literature" and then as "makers of readings," but now we need to admit one more challenge and remind ourselves that a workshop of busy makers is not a guarantee of learning. It is possible to imagine a class churning out poems, stories, dramatizations, videos, and wall displays, all simply as the set of hoops they have to jump through for that year's English class. They will probably have more fun than a less productive class, but there may still be little sense of what all these separate activities mean in the whole process and pattern of their growth. David Buckingham (1990) warns that activity is not an end in itself: "it is often very easy to generate 'busywork' for students—activities which keep them occupied, but whose underlying theoretical rationale they rarely understand"; for this reason it is vital that there be systematic reflection with help from the teacher (222). We not only have to clear an inviting space for student constructions; we also have to direct their attention to their own processes, so that they can see what's happening. We want students looking at their work and their tools, appreciating the possibilities and conceiving of themselves as long-term productive agents. This might happen through conferences between student and teacher, or through written reflections on the work. (For example, I require major pieces of work to be accompanied by a "covering letter" in which the student describes the intentions, assesses the processes of the assignment, and evaluates the final product.) Such self-awareness has been called metacognition, and there is growing belief that *how* students learn may be precisely *what* they most need to learn. In Jack Thomson's (1993) neat formulation, "If we know what we know, and if we know how we came to know it, we are powerful people" (133).

It is difficult but important work. The ideal for which we are striving is the creation of an English classroom in which students are not parasites on the body of literature, but active participants in an unfinished culture, agents with the power and responsibility to make sense of that culture and to contribute to its ongoing construction. If students do not see themselves that way, then I fear the work of English classes can be no more than the daily and yearly routine of "doing English," and students will be alienated not only from the work of the classroom, but, more seriously, from their own productive capacities. That would be more than an individual loss; it would be a failure for our collective future.

7 "Mind-Forged Manacles": The Academic Essay

Although I don't know exactly what the aim of literary studies is, I do not think it has to be the production of conclusions.

Keith Fort, "Form, Authority, and the Critical Essay" (1971)

The sound of someone thinking tentatively can be hard to find.

Rick Salutin, "Challenging Traditional Western Thought" (1995)

I found the following advice in a writing guide for students, published by a school board. A "basic essay," we are told, has an introduction, a conclusion, and a body consisting of "sufficient paragraphs to explain clearly what the writer has to say about the main idea of the essay." This basic essay "usually" has three body paragraphs, and by the time students graduate to the "senior essay," the prescription has tightened: the body of a senior essay unequivocally consists of "three well-developed paragraphs demonstrating how evidence can be shown to support the writer's thesis about the topic." A "thesis" emerges as the dominant concern in the senior essay: it should be expressed in a separate sentence in the introduction and reinforced in each of the body paragraphs. Furthermore, according to this manual, there is an almost mathematical formula for each paragraph. A "well-developed paragraph" consists of a topic sentence, concluding sentence, and, sandwiched between them, supportive sentences which come in sets of three: first, a sentence stating a "point" relevant to the topic; second, specific evidence to support that point; third, an explanation of how that evidence supports that point (Carleton Board of Education 1992, E2–E3).

There is an awesome symmetry about all these threes within fives, is there not? My purpose is not to embarrass the writers of this document: I wouldn't quote it if I didn't think it typical of guidelines found in high schools throughout Canada and the United States. Applebee's (1993) American research found that while English departments have official statements endorsing the writing process "as a vehicle for thinking and learning," much actual writing is "of the five-paragraph theme variety, rather formulaic." Applebee concludes that "the writing process approach has not been as fully integrated into the curriculum as people seem to

think" (156). I want to challenge, first of all, the phenomenon of the five-paragraph essay, which appears to have taken hold in our classrooms like a curiously resistant weed, despite repeated attempts to eradicate it. (It is, as far as I can make out, a North American species; teachers in other parts of the world are often surprised and puzzled to hear of this pseudo-genre.) However, the five-paragraph formula is only a symptom of something much more deeply rooted in our classroom traditions. Even teachers who scorn the five-paragraph model have probably absorbed a pattern of academic writing (and thinking) that will emerge as the real target of this chapter. I hope to raise enough questions about the workings of academic prose that readers will feel goaded to experiment with some of the alternative expository forms described later.

We should remind ourselves that there is nothing natural about today's school essay; it didn't appear in answer to any self-evident need within the range of available genres. Rather, its history is tied to the history of the institutions in which it circulates. The original "essay"—the essay of Montaigne and Bacon—was a comparatively informal genre. Peter Womack (1993) notes that the literary essay of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in England did not attempt to be objectively analytic, but rather to express "the cultivated response of a man of taste." In the second half of the 1800s, the essay was taken over by schools and the examination system, and the candidate was required to demonstrate not only knowledge, "but also his personal qualities, his general level of intellectual culture, even his moral character." It is in those earliest days of the school subject English that we first see essay questions requiring character assessments of figures from Shakespearean plays. In other words, the candidate does to literature what the examiner does to him—he assesses character (44–45).

In a paper called "The Essay Dies in the Academy, circa 1900," Jean Sanborn (1994) examines American composition textbooks from the turn of the century, and demonstrates how the academic essay stiffens during that period, as if it were being bound in a straitjacket. Sanborn traces revisions in successive editions of one textbook and shows how an initial concern for the organic growth of *ideas* is overtaken by a concern for regularized *form*, with the machinery of topic sentences, paragraphs, and single controlling ideas. To bridge the widening gap between ideas and form, textbook authors of the period claim that ideas beheld in their naked purity have a kind of symmetry, but this symmetry, Sanborn argues, in fact comes from the emerging apparatus of the essay form, not from anything inherent in thought itself. The new psychology of William James is known and indeed mentioned by some of these textbook

writers, but they fail to grasp James's understanding of thought as an irregular process of "leaps and pauses." Instead they assume that the best minds make a linear beeline towards a single point, and that "the orderly, straight-line essay is the perfect reflection of the mind's workings" (129). Sanborn accounts for this in institutional terms: the classics had lost their preeminence in the American academy and the sciences (including new social sciences) were positioning themselves to move into the palace of academia. If the fledgling subject of English was to consolidate its status amid this jockeying for influence, it had to "scientize" itself, purging anything that seemed tentative or ragged. In other words, it had to purge exactly those elements of the earlier literary essay that had made it a valuable tool for exploratory thought—its personalness, its openness, its willingness to "try out" ideas (as in the French *essayer*).

Five-Paragraph Essays

In our own time, the formulaic five-paragraph essay has been justified as a necessary first step for immature writers, often with a half-apologetic acknowledgment that, of course, it isn't really the kind of writing we want to encourage in the long run. For example, in an *English Journal* article, Thomas Nunnally (1991) describes using the model in college programs and then becoming disenchanted by the stiffly mechanical results. Oddly, however, he goes on to say, "I continue to believe that the FPT [five-paragraph theme] is a valuable teaching tool; comp teachers just need to be sure that their students don't perceive it as an end in itself" (70). This assumption that students can easily discard their earlier learning underestimates the importance of what goes on in classrooms. Early experiences are foundational, and we have to ask exactly what foundation we think we are building.

What does the five-paragraph essay teach about writing? It teaches that there are rules, and that those rules take the shape of a preordained form, like a cookie-cutter, into which we can pour ideas and expect them to come out well-shaped. In effect, the student is told, "You don't have to worry about finding a form for your ideas; here's one already made for you." This kind of instruction sends a perversely mixed message. On the one hand, it makes structure all-important, because students will be judged on how well they have mastered the form. On the other hand, it implies that structure can't be very important: it clearly doesn't have any inherent relationship to ideas, since just about any idea can be stuffed into the same form.

That, of course, is not right. Structure isn't an all-purpose predesigned add-on. Ideas don't come neatly packaged in sets of threes, and

they don't line themselves up in orderly patterns of point/evidence/explanation. Indeed, the most common symptom of five-paragraph essay writing is the student's heavy-handed attempt to make unwilling material fit those three obligatory body paragraphs. The student is forced to chop ideas into three oddly shaped or clumsily overlapping chunks, like Cinderella's sisters trying to squeeze their toes into someone else's shoe.

Writing, at its core, is a matter of *finding and making the shapes of ideas*, not a matter of cramming ideas into a universal pattern. Well-intentioned teachers believe they are giving students a helpful boost by handing over a prefabricated structure, but they may in fact be denying students the opportunity to do the very thing that writing is all about—making order, building a structure for the specific ideas at hand. In an important way, those students are not doing real writing. They are creating clever, almost lifelike facsimiles of writing, but a key element is missing: they have never asked themselves, "What shape is demanded by what I am trying to say?" Of course, they *think* they are doing real writing, which is why the pattern has tenacious staying power. There is great comfort in believing that all one has to do is fill in a pattern, but it is a counter-productive belief that brings the writer to distress when it fails to address more complex writing demands. Research on fluent and blocked writers indicates that blocked writers are often those with the most firmly articulated rules and patterns for writing (cited in Britton 1980, 64).

Defenders of the five-paragraph formula sometimes draw an analogy with the training wheels on a child's bicycle. In the article cited above, Thomas Nunnally says, "A fledgling biker does not use training wheels for the sake of it but relies on them for security while learning to balance" (70). But is "learning to balance" really what that child is doing? Or is the child rather *avoiding* the challenge of balance, by doing something that *looks like* balancing? Many parents come to realize that their children have spent too long depending on training wheels, and, in reality, they have delayed the learning of balance, which can be mastered in a couple of afternoons with a parent's supporting hand and an insistence that the challenge not be shirked.

Let s try another analogy. When I was a child, I went through a paint-by-numbers phase. I had a good time and completed a number of pieces that, from a distance and without your eyeglasses, looked almost like genuine art. I can say with absolute conviction that this taught me nothing about real painting. The paint-by-numbers kit absolved me of any responsibility to do what real artists do, which is to experiment and make decisions about color and shape. No art teacher would suggest using

paint-by-numbers as an instructional program, even though, as a consequence, they see a lot of student work that has not (yet) achieved the apparent control and balance of my paint-by-numbers work. Art teachers have, I suppose, learned that a little messiness may be a better sign of growth than ersatz orderliness.

A few years ago, a high school teacher wrote an "open letter" to speakers at English conferences, complaining about their contempt for the five-paragraph essay. I'm sure she still speaks for many of our colleagues.

> I can't stop believing in the five-paragraph essay as an appropriate starting point for teaching structure to beginning writers. . . . Nor can I stop believing that form and structure bear some connection to the expression of good ideas. A good idea is good only if it's communicated to the reader, and it must be communicated in a logical way. Furthermore, . . . [our students will] quite often have to present ideas in a well-organized manner. (Lockward 1985, 34)

This passage helps illuminate some of the confusion that has clouded the debate. The author of this protest values "form," "structure," "logic," and "organization." So do I. She is angry because she sees criticism of the five-paragraph formula as a wrong-headed attack on structure by theorists who think students should just spill their thoughts onto the page. I, on the other hand, am criticizing the formula precisely because I do think structure—or rather, structuring—is such an important part of writing. It is so important that you're not really writing unless you are doing it, and giving students a fill-in-the-blanks structure robs them of the very work they need to be doing if they're ever going to figure out how to shape ideas into words and words into ideas.

The five-paragraph essay doesn't "teach structure" any more than a paint-by-numbers kit teaches design. We teach structure by sitting down with students who have something they care about saying, helping them sort out how they might try to say it, and looking at examples of how other writers have structured their work—what Frank Smith calls "reading like a writer" (1983). It takes time, and the first results of students' own shaping definitely don't look as neat as formulaic essays, but perhaps our eyes, like art teachers' eyes, must learn to appreciate the inevitable messiness of the learner.

Academic Prose

If all the five-paragraph assignments across the continent were reformed into coached efforts to shape meaning, we would have taken a major step towards engaging students in the processes of real writing. We would then

have to confront even more fundamental questions about academic writing in general. This is a much more deep-seated problem than the previous one. No matter how attached we may be to the formulaic essay as a pedagogical strategy at a certain point in students' lives, none of us would claim to have earned university degrees in English by writing five-paragraph essays. On the other hand, writing general academic prose is exactly how we did earn those degrees, and a challenge to *that* tradition cuts more closely to our sense of ourselves. It is difficult for us to imagine other ways of going about academic work, but other ways there are.

Helen Fox, in *Listening to the World* (1994), describes the experiences of graduate students who have come to the United States from other cultures. These students were accomplished, even published, scholars in their first countries, but often appear incompetent in the eyes of American professors because of their discomfort with western academic writing. For example, the preferred "authoritative" tone of the essay is seen by these students as rude or bull-headed aggressiveness, and the insistence that writing stick to a main point and avoid digressions may seem puzzlingly narrow (125–26). Fox's accounts remind me of my own frustrating struggle to convince a student (from another country) to remove from his paper what I saw as flagrant digressions. The student finally mustered the courage to say, "Sir, I think you want me to write a stupider essay." Our responsibility to these and to all students is to make explicit what they have to do to succeed in this society, and Fox's work helps us in this task by clarifying some of the sources of their resistance. We have also another responsibility: to recognize and question the assumptions of our own traditions, even to the point of asking whether we do sometimes prefer "stupider" essays.

The Voice of Authority

Our reflection on academic writing begins with the issue of "authority." The formal essay is supposed to sound "authoritative," which generally equates with "impersonal" and "objective." This is an odd equation, when you think about it, since literature itself has often been understood to be about personal, subjective experience; the apparent contradiction stems from the effort of literary study to seem more like a "hard," "serious" field, like the sciences.

One practical consequence of this is the usual advice to avoid first person pronouns. The conversation goes like this, sometimes implicitly.

The teacher says, "Don't bother writing, '*I think* Macbeth is a victim of fate.' Just leave out the 'I think.'"

The student replies, "But it *is* my opinion."

"Yes, but you have hard evidence, don't you?" The student looks dubiously at her three-page paper as the teacher continues, "Anyway, we know it's your opinion. If you draw attention to that fact, you're just making yourself look weak and uncertain."

"Well, I *am* a little uncertain."

"So pretend you aren't."

Thus we have the bizarre situation of seventeen-year-olds who have read *Macbeth* for the first time, and have maybe read one or two other plays by Shakespeare, being expected to speak as if they were authorities on some aspect of the subject. This is like children dressing up in clothes too big for them. (Do we think it's "cute"?) It has been suggested that this pretense may cause anxiety in students, who feel they must conceal their doubts (Beach and Anson 1993, 192). Even more serious is the corrupted view of learning that is being perpetrated. The "authority" game requires the individual to stake out a position, gather resources like a military commander preparing for a siege, posture defiantly, and camouflage any weaknesses in the walls of the defense. Is that what we think learning looks like? Do we not rather see learning as something that happens in the give and take of ideas, aided by everyone's willingness to remain open and tentative? Do we really believe that the only voice worth listening to is a voice of feigned authority? Are there not many other voices that should have a role in writing about ideas: personal voices of doubt, receptiveness, and ambivalence? We probably do encourage those voices in classroom discussion and in journal writing, but as long as the traditional essay holds its privileged position, the message is clear: doubt and ambivalence may be fine as starting positions, but when it really starts to matter (on essays and exams), students must create an "illusion of mastery" (Meyer 1993, 52).

The Thesis

Central to the establishment of authority is the discovery or creation of a thesis. A thesis is a kind of answer, and being authoritative means making one's answer sound "right." After reading this far, you may anticipate that I'm going to say it might be more useful for students to defer the drive for answers in favor of more thoughtful elaboration of questions. It's not that I think a student's learning should be one long list of unanswered questions, or that we can never pull together our understanding and say, "This is how it seems to me, for now at least." What I am concerned about, however, is the kind of process that goes on in the student's mind.

When a student knows that everything said in an essay is going to be measured in terms of its support for a thesis, it is natural for thesis-hunting to begin quite early. That means that the hunt is on for *a generalization that will lend itself to coherent proof by the use of evidence and logic.* Consider what is excluded by the terms of that search. A reader's most urgent insights may be characterized by ambiguity or internal contradiction—particulars that don't ultimately resolve themselves into coherence—but a high school writer trying to wrestle that kind of insight into a provable generalization is asking for trouble. The writer's instinct may well warn him or her to drop those ideas because the traditional essay—certainly in the hands of a beginner—doesn't easily support that kind of tension.

In fact, even in the hands of professional critics, the essay (at least up to the last decade or two) has been more comfortable with coherence than with contradiction. Keith Fort, in 1971—one of the earliest challenges to academic writing—points out that most criticism of his time was concerned with demonstrating unity emerging from *apparent* contradiction. Fort doesn't dispute the existence of unity, but wonders why, out of all possible concerns in literature, this one is so popular; he suggests this is because the critic *has* to find an underlying order to answer the need for a thesis (633). Of course, disorder and unresolved contradiction may well be characteristics of literature (as of life), but that doesn't help the critic who is trying to prove that he or she has authoritatively identified an essential order.

The same pressure can be seen in high school students' work. Sally Mitchell (1993) has conducted interesting studies in Britain, analyzing the ways response to literature does and doesn't get expressed in students' essays. For example, she notes how one student, writing a paper on the poetry of Sylvia Plath, assumes that his task is to find a kernel of truth around which evidence from the poems can be clustered. The need for an abstract generalization allows (or maybe forces) the student to leave unexamined any inconsistencies that may have surfaced during the actual reading of Plath's work. Mitchell asks provocatively:

> What has a conclusion to do with aesthetic response? . . . There is, after all, no imperative reason why the essay form need favor answers rather than questions, reduction rather than complexity; these are no less successful at structuring thought. (27)

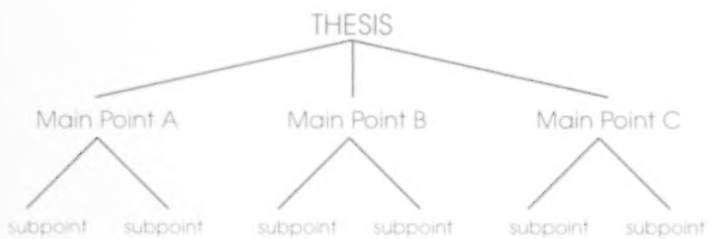
At the very least, we should discourage students from prematurely hunting for theses. Research conducted by Vine and Faust (1993) indicates that "deductively explaining"—starting out with a general proposi-

tion and then assembling evidence to support it—generally leads to the closing down of further understanding (108). Certainly there is little justification for telling students to decide on a thesis *before* they start writing: this effectively precludes the possibility of learning *through* the writing. Vine and Faust suggest a more appropriate starting point by making a distinction between closed "thematic statements" (such as "humans are basically evil despite our efforts to be good") and open "thematic concerns or questions" ("what is the role of evil in human nature?"). The *statement* works as a limiting encapsulation, whereas the *concern* opens up an area for exploration, and is therefore a more useful launching point (105).

Still, all our efforts to delay thesis formulation and make the writing a process of discovery may not be enough to counter the obvious fact that a thesis is what drives the traditional essay. As Keith Fort points out, if the only form in which writers can express their literary understanding is one that requires a thesis, then they have to look at literature as a source of theses (633).

Hierarchical Structure

One consequence of the commanding position of the thesis is the typically hierarchical structure of an essay. We have probably all taught a lesson on organization, demonstrating to students how the essay consists of several main points. Each main point has subpoints, each subpoint may have several sub-subpoints, and so on. This hierarchical arrangement may be diagramed as follows:



Each point rests on the subordinated details below, and each earns its right to be on the map by virtue of its relevance to the immediately superior point, creating a chain ultimately serving the imperial thesis at the apex of the pyramid.

Keith Fort (along with lots of others since then) points out that this diagram has an "astounding similarity" to military or governmental

organization charts (635). "Hierarchy" has become a bad word in the last couple of decades, and some corporations now try to "flatten" or "broaden" their hierarchies, de-emphasizing top-to-bottom power structures and strengthening lateral contacts. The hierarchical essay has accordingly come in for criticism, with complaints that it teaches people to think hierarchically and thus helps perpetuate all sorts of undesirable institutional practices. However, we don't have to embark on a critique of modern bureaucracy in order to see educational problems created by this model.

What's so bad about hierarchical structure? There may be nothing inherently wicked about it, but it is just one pattern of organization. It isn't as natural a vehicle for human thought as we might think from its current domination of expository writing in schools. Like any pattern, it has blind spots and distortions.

For example, it is a form that is strikingly unlikely to entertain "wild" or "way out" notions. If an idea doesn't snap into place within this structure, there is no provision for granting it a hearing. In this respect, the pattern is the polar opposite of a dream, in which associational logic allows almost anything to find a place. We wouldn't want exposition to sound like a dream vision, but we do know that some of the greatest breakthroughs in insight (including scientific insights) have occurred as creative leaps, ideas that rip through the usual lines of thought. I'm prepared to concede that people can express original and creative ideas in the hierarchical essay, but my point is that they do so *despite* the form: there is nothing within the form that *invites* divergent thinking.

In particular, the structure does not invite opposition. Everything points in one direction; all roads lead to the thesis. Of course, there is the rhetorical maneuver of acknowledging one's opponent, but this is only so that the writer can more effectively demolish those contrary ideas. Another way of putting this is to say that the standard essay is resolutely monological, rather than dialogical. Genuine dialogue opens the possibility of being transformed by the "other," which is why current educational theory makes much of talk and collaborative work. "Without contraries is no progression," wrote William Blake in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790), but hierarchical structure offers no way of seriously valuing contraries.

Hierarchical structure is also not hospitable to anything that unfolds concretely in time, since movement up the hierarchy, to the more important levels, is a movement toward greater abstraction. Concrete lived-through experience of literature (or of anything) can only be sifted for little nuggets of "supporting evidence" in the service of those higher

abstractions. If you believe that what happens during the unfolding *process* of reading or the *course* of thinking merits examination, you may want to write a narrative of that reading or that thinking, but the hierarchical structure isn't built to accommodate narrative except as isolated illustration.

Finally, a hierarchy stresses relationships with the points above and below. Essay writers—certainly novice writers—who want to draw horizontal connections across strands can find themselves in structural difficulties. This is too bad, because those sideways threads might have led to conceptual breakthroughs. (That's why some corporations try to undo compartmentalization, getting departments talking to each other instead of communicating only up and down their respective chains of command.) Casting lateral threads would start to make the structure look less like an upside-down tree, and more like a web—an image we have seen before in this book.

Narrow Focus

Essay writers are typically advised to choose a thesis that will be "manageable." Because they will be judged on how well they have defended the thesis, "manageable" translates as "narrow." My academic instinct, and probably yours, has always been to warn students away from any topic that seems too broad in scope, because I know the essay format won't allow them to do justice to the subject. If they wish, they can always make a token gesture toward larger concerns in the introduction and conclusion. For students who resist this advice, I'm ready with homilies about "mental discipline" and "attention to detail." If we can look beyond the bias of the essay, however, are we really that sure about the educational value of having students say a lot about not very much? There are good reasons for the microscopic view, but aren't there just as compelling reasons for a macroscopic perspective?

In earlier chapters, I wrote about breaking the seals around the "individual person" and the "individual text" and about studying how both people and texts are situated within significant networks. This work requires reaching out to larger areas than have traditionally been thought appropriate for English essays. I have been as much a specialist as anyone else; I have, as a student, taken pleasure in probing tiny points. Now, however, I find myself suspecting that some of the most important questions and answers may lie outside the circumscribed zones of traditional

academic work. The recent emergence of environmental awareness, for example, is based on the recognition that hardly anything is a simple, self-contained act, and that we must struggle to comprehend the complexity of interrelated phenomena.

In view of this, I am haunted by David Buckingham and Julian Sefton-Green's (1994) study of one able student's essays written over three years of classes in English and in Media Studies. Their analysis of the student's work suggests that "progress" in Media Studies means a widening and deepening understanding of the world and one's experiences of the world, while "progress" in English seems to mean something much narrower, something more like getting better at writing English essays with their precise text-and-evidence protocols (166–83).

Also haunting is Helen Fox's (1994) account of "Carla," a graduate student formerly educated in Chile.

> The major difference in writing styles that she had noticed during her first semester, she told me, was that Americans tend to examine a subject very closely, as if they were looking at it under a microscope or dissecting it and describing its parts. The Latin tendency, however, is to "look at the subject from far away" and to attach great importance to the surrounding context. This difference was crucial, Carla thought, when you live under a dictatorship, for if you focus in on the subject and ignore what is going on around it, the aims of the dictatorship will be well served. . . . Far from being a simple change in style, learning to write for the U.S. university was an act that for Carla held profound political implications. (72–73)

Richard Hopkins (1994) reminds us of the distinction that has been made (by Thomas Kuhn, Jerome Bruner, and others) between "puzzles" and "difficulties." "Puzzles" have precise constraints and an explicit methodology for achieving finite solutions, whereas "difficulties" have less predictable forms. When we treat a difficulty as if it were a puzzle, we limit the focus, foregrounding a small area that lends itself to methodical treatment with our favorite disciplinary tools. As a consequence, there may be limited significance to whatever answers we find. More profound learning requires us to tackle difficulties, not just puzzles; it needs "engagement with the fringe, rather than exclusive focus on the figure, as in puzzle work" (100). We may wonder whether our insistence on narrowly focused topics has turned essay writing in English into "puzzle work"—clever, specialized work that fails to recognize contexts looming just outside our range of vision.

Alternative Expository Forms

The challenge is to find other ways of writing about ideas and meanings. We need forms of exposition that don't force students to pose as individual authorities, but rather encourage tentative and cooperative exploration. We need to relax the pressure to encapsulate thought in a thesis and develop instead forms that invite divergent thinking, value opposing ideas, and make it possible to examine complex processes and forge meaningful links.

Translating all that into practical classroom tasks sounds like a tall order. Perhaps we can make it more manageable by starting with the idea of "dialogue." In most English teachers' classrooms, the handling of talk bears witness to our conviction that learning is helped by dialogue: we seek to engage student voices in the shared work of building ideas. If we could bring similar thinking to expository writing, we might see ways of breaking free of the narrowness and defensive individualism that too often characterizes essay writing. I think this is related to the distinction, sometimes made in the field of women's studies, between "connected" versus "autonomous" knowing (Belenky et al. 1986). Richard Andrews (1994) suggests looking for inspiration in forms like "Socratic dialogue, symposia, play scripts, dialogue in stories, stories with more than one narrator, poems that take question-and-answer format, interviews, conversations" (65); we might add letter writing. In what follows, I try to pick up some of those suggestions.

Dialogue between Students

When students write informal initial responses to what they are reading or viewing, it makes sense for those responses to become the basis for small-group discussions. That conversation can then transfer to written exchanges, with students, probably in pairs, writing thoughtful replies to each other's responses. Initially they will need specific reminders to guide them through the task: "In your own words, explain the main ideas that seem important in this person's response. Point out a thought that hadn't occurred to you, or hadn't occurred quite this way until you read this journal. With what ideas do you find yourself agreeing most easily? What ideas are most difficult for you to accept? Why?"

Students sometimes see this kind of work with peers as a time-waster. (After all, it's what the teacher thinks that really counts, right?) That attitude may be countered if the work pointedly leads to a shared product. Richard Beach and Chris Anson (1993) suggest that what they

call "peer-dialogue journals" be followed up by the writing of a "collaborative, dialogic essay" (205). Such an essay would develop a selection of issues raised in the earlier, more informal commentaries. This must not be seen as a species of debate or quarrel, with students trying to score points off each other, but rather as an opportunity to learn something by coming to understand how someone else thinks, and by elaborating one's own thought for the benefit of an eminently tangible audience. An exchange of friendly letters, rather than a debate, should be the pattern for its structure and tone.

We can't take for granted the skills needed for that kind of helpful, thoughtful work. After all, the competitive atmosphere of schools usually rewards the person who can prove, "I'm right, you're wrong, and here's why." It's also possible that the identity consolidation going on within adolescents sometimes drives them to bolster their own egos by obsessively poking holes in the positions of others. That's why many take pleasure in raucous classroom debates, but that exuberance shouldn't be mistaken for learning, nor should it always be indulged by teachers. (There are also students who pretend that disagreement doesn't exist; they would rather avoid contention than deal with it constructively.) Interactions between individuals should become a matter for explicit instruction. Students can watch real or role-played discussions with analytic eyes and ears, looking for patterns of communication and thought. ("Who was doing most of the talking? To whom were they speaking? Who was listening? How did you know? Did anyone seem to learn anything or have a new thought? Was anyone able to move gracefully beyond an initial position?") One topic can be handled two different ways for comparison: once as a traditional shoot-down-your-opponent debate and once as an "active listening" discussion, in which each student must paraphrase the previous speaker's comments (to the satisfaction of that speaker) before going on to add their own comments.

This attention to communication awareness may seem strangely remote from the task of writing academic exposition. However, unless students understand what goes on when people communicate, including the possible benefits of actually *listening* to someone else, there is little hope of engaging them in writing that goes beyond trumpeting their own stances (or stances that they think are their own), little chance of their valuing encounters with other minds. Describing similar approaches in college classes, Catherine Lamb (1991) claims that collaborative exercises in mediation and negotiation can lead to empathetic understanding of others' viewpoints becoming part of students' approaches to writing.

Indeed, the very fact that it seems strange to associate issues in communication with essay writing should tell us something about our existing practices, should it not?

Dialogue with a Text

Theorists describing the active role readers play in making sense of a text often speak of how we "negotiate" or work through "transactions" with whatever is on the page. We can make that abstraction more concrete by literally asking students to enter into a conversation with some aspect of the text. This can happen in two different ways: an interview with a character or an interview with the author.

Students may script a conversation between themselves and characters from texts. This exercise makes most sense if the chosen character is one whose behavior or attitudes are at some *distance* from the student's—someone whose choices the student finds hard to understand or justify. (For example, most students would find it more useful to talk with a disturbing character like Jack from Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, rather than with the more conventional Ralph.) The student's task is to "discuss" with the character that difference of values, exploring and clarifying the student's own position, but also trying to script the character's voice as believably and sympathetically as possible. It's sometimes too easy for students to write conventional character assessments, slamming unsavory figures and celebrating heroes; the task of writing in role, at its best, forces readers to more subtle, empathetic understanding of what must be going on inside a character's head. (How *would* Jack explain his actions if you could get him to set aside all his posturing and speak frankly?)

Of course, this activity could fall short of its potential, collapsing into a bout of scripted accusations, the character behaving like a monster. It is important for the teacher to make clear that such treatment would miss the point of the assignment, that the purpose of the exercise is to try one's best to understand the kind of person who, in real life, might be very hard to understand. Once again, classes need to learn to be sensitive to the ways people communicate and the possibilities of honest listening. This activity also benefits from "live" role-playing warm-ups in class, the kind of dramatic work discussed in Chapter 5.

A few sophisticated student readers might like to play with textuality by making the character aware of itself as an authorial construction, but it is more likely that, for most students, the dialogue will unfold as if the character were simply a real person. It might seem contradictory of me

to recommend this strategy, after criticizing such innocence of textuality in Chapter 3. My point then, however, was not that students should *never* enter the imaginative worlds of fiction, only that that experience should not blind them to textuality.

A more textually-aware version of this assignment develops when the student converses not with a character, but with the implied author. Significant learning is most likely to occur when the student goes beyond congratulating and thanking the author and begins to tackle areas of uncertainty or discomfort. The initial instructions might be, "Even if you liked this book a lot, there may be something that was puzzling, or that you think seemed a bit 'off,' for whatever reason. Imagine that you have a chance to talk to the writer about your reading. Of course, don't forget that the author might find it hard to explain everything he or she wrote."

That last sentence is necessary if we're going to head off "thesis anxiety." It isn't as if the student has to find "the right answer" to questions raised in the dialogue. If there's any hint of that being the teacher's secret evaluation criterion, students will understandably choose to raise only those questions for which they're sure they already know the answers. The real potential of the technique lies in the thoughtful new discoveries that may surprise students as they write in role. They should be encouraged to compose initial drafts without a great deal of planning, assured that the thoughtfulness of the *whole* paper is what ultimately matters, not the achievement of a pat resolution. Students may well finally decide that they stand apart from the author on crucial issues; thus the assignment helps students articulate their own stances as well as inviting imaginative identification with the author—Csikszentmihalyi's "differentiation" and "integration" again.

Incidentally, further variations on these strategies are possible: you might like to experiment with dialogues between characters from different books or between authors of different books. Anne Frank believed that, despite everything, people are basically good: I've always wondered how she would handle a conversation with the authors of *Lord of the Flies* and *The Chocolate War*.

Internal Dialogue

The writer of a conventional essay is expected to have a monolithic mind, or, more precisely, to pretend to have a monolithic mind. We all know that real people experience doubt and self-contradiction. Sometimes, uncertainties can be resolved, but other times, and especially when deal-

ing with really important issues, learning means coming to healthy acceptance of the irresolvability of such tensions. Composition textbooks, however, do not list "doubt" and "self-contradiction" among the desirable traits of the academic essay. The "authoritative voice" requires a pretense of uniformity—a pretense that conceals productive stress and honest ambivalence. It is not in our students' interests to continue this concealment. They need to see how understanding is not monolithic or univocal. There are many voices inside one's head and heart, and sometimes the richest learning comes from listening to, rather than hushing, voices that speak from small, dark corners.

One way of acknowledging the role of inner dialogue comes from an exercise described by Sheree Meyer (1993). Students record their thoughts about an assigned passage onto a page divided into two columns. In one column, they write what they think the text is saying—in Meyer's instructions, "stating your reading as though you're sure of yourself and the author's intentions." The other column is used for comments that are more "hesitant, questioning your assertions and certainties of the 'right' side" (60). This column is the place to call up thoughts that take the form of "what if?" or "but maybe . . ." Meyer's students proceed from this exercise to the writing of traditional essays, and although this isn't a controlled experiment, her impression is that the subsequent essays are "less reductive and frequently more energetic" (61), perhaps as a result of the early legitimacy granted to those other voices.

My own inclination is to capitalize on the initial momentum more explicitly, by assigning follow-up writing that confers official status on the alternative voices. Fortunately, there are conventions that accommodate multivocality. I've already talked about play scripts; we should also remember the parenthetical expression—by definition a vehicle for quibbles, reservations, and tangents. Within parentheses, there is license for text that would otherwise be judged too thematically or grammatically disruptive. (The parenthesis is the ghetto in the city of academic discourse, literally, "that which is outside the thesis.") The formal essay's hostility to multivocality predictably leads to an effort to exterminate parentheses, and the usual advice for students is, "If it's worth saying, say it in your main text; otherwise, don't say it at all." Meyer asks:

> But what then do we do with the additional thoughts or comments that seem, at least at some point, important to us? If they are not expressed, it is implied, they will not prove disruptive. Parenthetical comments seem to make holes in an essay that is supposed to appear whole, complete, and unified. But that, not surprisingly, is exactly the point. (57)

Perhaps students can write essays in which they are licensed to include parenthetical explorations, giving voice to thoughts that might otherwise be extinguished. These other voices can be represented typographically by parentheses, but students might also experiment with contrasting typefaces, italicization, or different colors of ink, which William Faulkner, in his letters (1977, 44), wished had been possible for his multivocal novel *The Sound and the Fury*.

However, just before rushing to take the lid off a cacophony of voices, we had better steady ourselves and consider a couple of dangers. For one thing, we have no right to conceal from students the expectations of traditional exposition. Students should indeed know and practice the conventional writing that will earn them success in the academic world, but if they are to gain real textual power, that conventional form should be taught not as transcendentally superior communication, but simply as one choice of form that has its own institutional purposes and limitations. Like bidialectal speakers, students should recognize that there is a time and place for the restricted style of academia. Our effort is not to deny students the ability to write that language, but rather, in the interests of learning, to add a few more possibilities to the range of expository writing.

Another danger lies in the threat of self-indulgent chaos. People have all sorts of inconsequential and sloppy thoughts, and if there has been any benefit from traditional academic training, it has surely been that, at its best, it does inculcate habits of rigorous thinking and concentrated focus. If we now suspect that the academic definition of "thought," particularly the kind of thought allowed in writing, has been a little too narrow for its own good, that does not mean that we want to knock down the whole edifice and proclaim that "anything goes." If you walk into a classroom tomorrow and suddenly announce that you want to see a lot of parenthetical tangents in the next assignment (and if your students believe you), you are likely to receive a pile of papers clotted with obscure chaos. I am not advocating free-association writing therapy, nor am I interested in indulging an academic version of schizophrenia—"the many faces of the student Eve."

I am interested in hard thought and meaningful expression—in fact, harder thought and more meaningful expression than we have often had in the past. Constructive use of several voices does not grow out of nowhere. The class must be prepared by the kinds of dialogical activities described earlier. They have to have talked to each other and come to understand how challenging and rewarding it is to do a good job of listening to someone else. They have to recognize that good dialogue

doesn't come from separate people setting off their own clever fireworks, but from the *engagement* of two or more minds *committed* to building something together. Once this is understood, there is a chance that the concept of respectful dialogue can be internalized, and that students may listen harder and better, even to their own conflicting thoughts. If this work turns out to be interesting for students, it's not because we have told them to "go wild" or because we have indulged flights of fancy, but because it *is* interesting to see thought worked out in its full and rich complexity.

Narration

When we read our way through a text, or work our way through a problem, we are going through a process. Standard exposition has been more interested in supposed final understandings and solutions, and has had scant patience with the processes by which they are achieved. However, if we want students to examine how they learn and how they make sense of texts, those processes have to become objects of attention, and the most obvious way of talking about a process is through narration, telling the story of the process. Jerome Bruner (1986) distinguishes between a "paradigmatic" (or "logico-scientific") "mode of thinking" and a "narrative mode." The language of the paradigmatic mode is "regulated by requirements of consistency and noncontradiction." The narrative mode, on the other hand, has to meet only the requirement of being lifelike (13).

I have had students first track their responses to a novel in journal form, then return to those journals to distill a narrative that represents the growth of their understanding of the novel. That growth might include frustrations, setbacks, diversions, and surprises. Telling the stories of their readings, they don't have to worry about proving that their understandings of the novels were consistent and noncontradictory. Those would be the usual criteria for an analytic literary paper, but *reading* doesn't happen that way. Instead, they only have to convince me that they have brought reflective minds to the task of carefully rendering lifelike descriptions of their reading processes.

I have already written about depictions of reading processes; at this point we need only note a few features of this kind of writing. First, it is not impersonal: students are making sense of what happened during *their* readings—their confusions, their surprises. Judith Atkinson (1989) cites a student's essay that is vigorous, interesting, and sophisticated but would probably not satisfy most British examiners, because it is not a "well ordered argument" but is instead driven by personal narrative (100).

Atkinson's point is that for many successful writers in secondary schools, real "authority" comes from their experience and gains power from moving between the narrative of that experience and more "argumentative" writing (105).

A second observation is that narrative can be a much more sophisticated structure than the pointy-headed hierarchical essay. Narrative offers the possibility of multiple meanings woven throughout the fabric—strands that connect, part, and form new connections, as in a novel. Jean Sanborn (1994) suggests that a kind of "woven essay" might allow writing to "follow the convolutions of thought." She continues that not having a controlling thesis isn't the same as having no point: "The meanings are embedded in the journey of the essay, not isolated in the last sentence of the first paragraph" (135). I'm not romantically imagining that sixteen-year-olds will write exposition that has the woven richness of a novel by Virginia Woolf. I'm simply suggesting that telling a story, including the story of one's own reading, opens a few doors for meaningful connections—connections between ideas within one's story, and connections with the student writer's own experience and understanding. These doors are seldom opened and perhaps don't even exist in more rigidly defined hierarchical writing.

There is considerable risk of making superficial modifications to the form of the essay without really changing underlying thought patterns, just as most new media (like television) are first seen only as vehicles for delivering the content of older media (like radio). Indeed, we have already seen this in the way "process approaches" to writing instruction, which were intended to contribute to the student's *own* powers of structuring expression, have been conscripted for the delivery of prefabricated five-paragraph essays. This isn't a sinister conspiracy; it is natural to make sense of new ideas initially in terms of the old. It is hard for us, with our training, to relearn what it means to write academically. I'd like to be able to report that the challenge is more easily met by high school students, who don't bear that same deadweight of academic baggage. To a certain extent that is true. Unfortunately, I've also seen many papers that were supposed to be written in more open forms, but which in fact sound like five-paragraph essays with incongruous salutations grafted onto the beginnings. ("Dear Sue: Hi! How ya doing? You know, I've been thinking. Relationships between men and women have presented problems throughout the ages. Foremost among these . . .") It is as if the student guesses that the assigned format is a gimmick.

We want authentic new avenues for thinking and learning, not trendy new fashions for writing. If we're going to be honest with ourselves about that difference, we need to keep asking whether we can identify kinds of learning in students' experiments that would not have been easily achieved in more traditional essays. We also need to keep trying our own hands at these other forms, to experience for ourselves what kinds of thinking and feeling are possible.

An increasing number of academics are writing about and through alternative forms. It is worth looking up, for example, essays by Olivia Frey (1990), Catherine Lamb (1991), Terry Myers Zawacki (1992), and Jane Tompkins (1994). Their work is exciting and alive as they try to enact in their writing the changes about which they are talking. They use multiple voices, interweaving personal accounts with more "hard-headed" logical thought. They try to avoid argumentative one-upmanship, frankly admitting anxiety about how the relaxed authority of their own voices will be received. These are all female scholars, and some of their pieces are explicitly feminist, with titles like Lamb's "Beyond Argument in Feminist Composition" and Zawacki's "Recomposing as a Woman." However, we can't afford to let this kind of work be identified only as a feminist project. Reading their articles gives me the refreshing conviction that there are still more things in the world to be thought, felt, and expressed—things that ought to be important in English classrooms, but which have not been available to traditional academic discourse.

Understandably, some will say, "But we still have to prepare students for mainstream university writing." Yes, and as I have said, I don't want to rob students of the knowledge necessary to succeed in the system as it stands. Still, we should think carefully about what exactly "preparation for university" means. For one thing, the essayists I have just cited are all university teachers, their articles published in journals such as *College English* and *College Composition and Communication*. My impression is that critiques of academic writing are *more* familiar to university faculty than they are to high school teachers. We should beware of locking students inside the rooms of our own academic histories.

The really important point, however, is that we are not just talking about kinds of writing. We are talking about thinking and meaning-making. We are reaching for ways in which writing may tap more human potential for understanding and discovery. We have to help our students make their minds as powerful and flexible as possible, and that means unshackling the rusty manacles of imprisoned thought.

8 Cultural Studies

The need for an integrated subject within the curriculum in which the widest possible range of cultural activities can be explored and analyzed has never been greater.

Macdonald Daly, "The City of Caxton and the Electronic Suburbs" (1992)

I suspect that we are moving to a new era when the term 'English' will have to go. My view is that the umbrella 'cultural studies' may more properly represent what we are offering to the curriculum. We are indeed about reading and making the world through reading and making literature, broadly defined. Aren't we?

Garth Boomer, *Metaphors and Meanings* (1988)

So far in this book, I have been weaving bits of material, slowly fashioning areas of a teaching practice that would make sense in view of current theory and my own experience. It is time now to step back and see the larger pattern taking shape. I need to make good my promise to offer at least the beginning of a coherent synthesis.

I suppose my frustration with English as it has been taught amounts to this: *the subject hasn't been big enough.*

That thought may appall thousands of hard-working teachers, who will say, "Not big enough? Here I am trying to cover five genres, twenty-five rhetorical devices, and four centuries of literary history, teaching students how to write responses, business letters, and essays both formal and informal, struggling to develop aesthetic awareness, correct spelling, and a philosophical appreciation of the human condition, all the while with my eye on the next statewide test, *and you say the subject isn't big enough?!*" However, I don't want to squeeze more units into course outlines, or pile more work onto teachers and students. In fact, I would like to see a much less cluttered curriculum, but a curriculum that has been vigorously rethought at the deepest levels—rethought and rebuilt with a broader and hence sturdier foundation.

We flatter ourselves that school English is a subject of universal significance, a humanizing study touching both self and society, marrying ideas and feelings, building useful skills and important attitudes. At its best and in the hands of the wisest practitioners, I think that has sometimes been true. I also think those peak moments have been too few and haphazard for us to deserve smug self-congratulation. I am sometimes

embarrassed by the parochialism of a discipline that grandly claims to be about how humans use language to make sense of their world, but then, in practice, hurriedly shrinks its focus to something much less grand. The subject turns out too often to be only about individual readers (largely ignoring their manifold embeddedness in the world) responding to individual texts (chosen mainly from a tiny sample of a privileged literary tradition, snubbing the ocean of popular culture that in reality dominates experience)—responding in ways that are receptive and reproductive, rather than critical and productive, and thinking in ways that tend increasingly toward the tunnel vision of the conventional essay.

Any single-sentence formula has to be reductive, but perhaps we can at least agree that English is about things we do with language—seeing how they are done and giving students power to do those things themselves. If we're really going to understand the workings of language, we keep coming back to *interactions*, for language is a currency, valued as it is passed between people. Individual readers come into being through interactions between complex sets of personal, familial, and cultural factors. Those readers interact with a universe of (broadly defined) textual material, in which each text jostles for position in arrays of other texts. We could speak similarly of "writers," "speakers," or "listeners," as well as "readers." As we reflect on the interactions that define our experiences of language, the image of the solitary reader, writer, or text becomes less and less useful. Instead, we find ourselves thinking of networks and webs (indeed, webs upon webs) and asking where the individual reader, writer, or text is located in this crisscrossing complexity. And how was that locus established? (By self? By others?) And which of the locating criteria are absolute and which are relative? And what do we learn by reaching out across the strands, spinning new threads between text and text, connecting ourselves with other readers and other writers?

The world increasingly appreciates ecological, sociological, and technological complexity; a naive individualist focus inside the walls of the English classroom seems quaintly inadequate. It is *not* that we shouldn't care about individual students and texts. We should, and I do. We also recognize, however, that students and texts are embedded in huge, living, sometimes contradictory networks, and if we want students to understand the workings of textuality, then we have to think about those larger systems, just as ecologists, family therapists, and "chaos" theorists have all learned to think systemically. Certainly, growth of the individual matters, but—to return once more to Csikszentmihalyi (1990)—personal growth arises precisely in the recognition of one's position, integrated but differentiated, within a web of people and ideas (41).

An English program founded on that kind of awareness of positions and interactions within systems might feature some of the work described in earlier chapters, including the following.

- treatment of texts as constructions within intertextual webs, sponsored by institutions and interacting with audiences
- examination of the role and uses of popular culture and mass media
- study of our own complex situations as readers
- dramatic exploration of interactions between people, and between the verbal and the nonverbal
- greater engagement of students as active makers involved in cultural transactions
- breaking the mold of the narrowly individualist academic essay

Some have hopefully suggested that if English can renew itself along the lines described here, it should be renamed "Cultural Studies." (See, for example, Boomer 1988, 107; Daly 1992,18; Buckingham and Sefton-Green 1994, 5.) Such a program (at the university level) is described by Alan Kennedy (1992):

> Cultural objects, like selves, occupy multiple positions. A program in cultural studies, allied with rhetorical theory, ought to be able to begin to develop a curriculum that deals with the multiplicity of positionings that occupy our lives and our students' lives. . . . Once having recognized a position, or possible positions, students are set to become players, or agents. So a principle of difference, [which] . . . makes one aware of the need to deal with contexts and changes of contexts, and a principle of arguing from a position, might be one model for a new program in cultural studies, one that stands to overcome at least some of the costly neglect of the humanities in our time. (42)

On the other hand, in *The Western Canon*, Harold Bloom (1994) comments rather more dryly on such programs. He predicts that "Departments of English" will be renamed "Departments of Cultural Studies," in which "*Batman* comics, Mormon theme parks, television, movies, and rock will replace Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, and Wallace Stevens" (519). Bloom, I take it, is irritated by the kinds of ideas I have been pursuing. He sees reading and writing as essentially individual ("solitary," "lonely") habits—which, of course, is how they look from the outside—and insists that discussion of contexts should be limited merely to "finding adequate backgrounds" for canonical works (521). His caricature of Cultural Studies may strike a sympathetic chord in English teachers, many of whom understandably want to preserve a field called

"English" with literature at the center (Peel and Hargreaves 1995, 48). In Bloom's prophecy, anxiety stems from the specter of popular culture "replacing" classic literature, but, as I argued in Chapter 3, it is not really a question of kicking out *Macbeth* and replacing it with *Batman*. It is rather a recognition that textuality operates within thickets of knowledge and experience, and if we value understanding how that works, we can't afford to be focused in narrow absorption, sitting at the feet of verbal icons that we have set on pedestals. Ultimately, it is the machinery of textuality, not the individual text, that is our object of study. I may spend weeks with a class studying *Macbeth*, but really it's not *Macbeth* I care about: what matters is my students' ability to do things with texts—any texts.

Changing the name of the subject runs several risks. We might change only the label and then complacently go about business as usual. Or we might rename the field and then get the high school subject tangled up with what various universities mean by "Cultural Studies." Secondary English has long suffered from being implemented as a junior version of university English, which has meant teaching "literary criticism" or "literary history," rather than something more precisely tailored for the needs of adolescents. It would be a shame to repeat this mistake by calling ourselves teachers of "Cultural Studies" and then trying to ape postsecondary programs that have already claimed that name—programs which are sometimes more grounded in the social sciences than in language and literature, and which are often politicized to a degree that secondary teachers would find unacceptable.

To be fair, I had better acknowledge that depoliticization of the subject is exactly what some university-level supporters fear most from the spread of Cultural Studies to wider audiences (Balsamo 1992, 149). And, of course, inviting students to think about how their situation in society affects their understanding, and offering them power to do something about that, *is* political. For that matter, it would be political to decide *not* to raise such issues; any decision about what we will and will not talk about in school is potentially political. If I have to make such a choice, I prefer to come down on the side of awareness and power for my students. Still, I hope we can figure out how to stop short of becoming partisans for particular versions of awareness and doctrines of power. We want to avoid the inflamed political polarization that has characterized discussions of English teaching in, for example, the United Kingdom. Let's not underestimate the difficulty of finding responsible, fair, and balanced ways of handling social and cultural questions. I don't have ready-made solutions for that dilemma; I only hope we can work together to chart a course through this terrain.

In the best possible scenario, a change of name might have the salutary effect of getting people's attention—perhaps most of all, our own attention, telling us that something new is happening, that a page has been turned. Then we might start thinking about how the things we care about—the reading, writing, talking, thinking—occur not in locked closets or individual cells, but as elements linked into immense cultural fields. Finding pathways for students to explore those fields—*that's* what I care about, not the name of the subject.

Do I develop all these directions all the time in my own classroom? Hardly. I have learned to be gentle with myself and forgiving of failure. I try new things a little at a time, falling back on the familiar, slowly building a practice that starts to hold together, starts to do the things that I think matter. I have not tried to transform myself overnight; if I had, I would have given up in frustration. We have nothing to gain by overwhelming ourselves with condemnation of our past and with unreasonable expectations for immediate change. We have much to gain from careful thought and reflective experimentation. We and our students have growing to do. In time, we may share the excitement of being part of a discipline that claims with new conviction its central mandate in the curriculum.

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